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Cover by P. R. Green illustrating *Star Tober*

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editorial



YOU KNOW, CUTTING OUT THE interior story illustrations has certainly pushed up the wordage. This issue we run to three novelettes, four short stories and an article, plus the usual book reviews. The extra space for story content has given me a chance to try a little experimentation, and experimentation is, after all, the life blood of science fiction.

Robert Presslie, who has been appearing in *Authentic* for a long time now, has reached a new high with his *Star Tober*. What could be more familiar than a circus? And yet, as he points out, a circus is really a civilization in miniature. His story, then, while not letting the symbolism intrude, yet does point a moral. I like his new style of presentation and if he keeps it up he'll be way up among the top authors of today.

Most of you will remember Jon J. Deegan; he was a firm favourite back in the old days and his Old Growler series won popular acclaim. *The Lights of Anker-Mo* recalls the old days; old readers may meet old friends and new readers find something to entertain them. Certainly the contrast between Deegan's story

and our third novelette, by Robert J. Tilley, makes for interest.

The shorts, too, are a mixed bag. *Vale!* has pathos, but it has something else; the double-take ending which is always a joy. Ron Lowam has taken the obvious and looked at it from a new angle. Everyone knows that possessions are desirable but, when you come down to it, who owns whom? D. Wilcox has toyed with the concept of the most exclusive club in the world, while a brand new author, G. W. Locke, has come up with a brand new idea. And before you start to argue about his premise just take a look at the natural wonders on our own planet.

Kenneth Johns needs no introduction and he returns with an article as topical as tomorrow's news. Also he brings home a few points most of us tend to overlook. It is just as well to keep our feet on the ground even though we let our imagination soar among the stars.

A mixed issue and, because of that, I feel a satisfactory one. Variety is always welcome and we certainly have variety.

Even though I've had to cut down this department to get it all in.

E.C.T.

STAR TOBER

By ROBERT PRESSLIE

A tober is the place where a circus makes a stand. Sometimes the next tober is a few miles away; sometimes several hundred. But Considine's Circus set a new, all-time record

CONSIDINE'S CIRCUS WAS ready to roll. The great diesels throbbed with suppressed power. The jutting king-poles vibrated over the end of their trailer like giant antennæ. The riggers, like drenched beetles in their black slickers, whipped the duckboards from behind the wheels of the wagons and wedged them through the ropes that lashed the quarter-poles, the side-poles and the king-poles together. The ropes were so tight they shaved the mud off the duckboards clean as a razor.

Up front, Big John Considine hung out of the driving window of the lead wagon. He was oblivious to the torrential rain. He wore a checked shirt, open down the front all the way to his belt, and his sleeves were rolled right up over his biceps. Even the rain could not slick down the black

curly hair that matted his arms. He was waiting for the signal from the top tentman that all was secure. He wished it was time to roll.

In the menagerie wagons most of the animals were quiet. They heard the throb of diesels and knew from experience that the best way to avoid a scary jolt was to lie down. But the cats were restless and Loder was in the cage with them, soothing and cajoling them in whispered guttural accents. There was nothing of the traditionally brutal Teuton about Loder. He was young, incredibly handsome—almost beautiful—and he was the despair of countless women because he loved only his cats. He wished the wagons would start rolling so the cats could settle.

Ma Lee was also anxious for the circus to get moving. She was

clean out of gin, and the sooner they hit the next town the better. She dealt herself the cards incessantly. She tried them in fives, sevens and nines, but she never once got the jack of hearts that was Loder to appear. Ma Lee was neither a Romany nor a Lee of any kind, but it would be difficult to show she did not have the gift. She was something over forty. She had a dark and sinister beauty if it was looked for hard enough. After a lifetime of brief and stormy alliances with just about every male in the circus, she was still not spent of passion. She was one of those who despaired about Loder. She riffled the cards once again.

There was not a single member of the circus who was sorry to be leaving. It had been a miserable three-day stand for all of them: freaks, clowns, fliers, barkers, jugglers, tumblers, cats, elephants, horses—everybody and everything was sick of the place; even the diesels had worked ineffectively, for hardly anyone had come to see the lights and hear the mangled music that were born of the diesels' power. It was a hick town at the best of it, the rubes had been unresponsive, and on top of that it had rained incessantly the whole three days. Nobody was sorry when it was time to pull down for the next jump.

Big John Considine watched the last of the riggers climb aboard

the wagons. He acknowledged the top tentman's signal with a thick thumb and took his head in out of the rain. He released the brakes and opened up the throttle. The circus started to roll.

The wagons had to make a half-circle of the field to get to the side where the trunk road was. They followed Big John's lead and kept well outside the churned-up sea of mud that marked the circus's stance. With the first turn of the wheels everybody relaxed, men, women and animals. It was only a short jump to their next tober, which was in a sizeable market town and promised to be worthwhile.

But before the lead wagon with Big John at the wheel was halfway round the field, the jump was over. And it was not a short jump. Considine's Circus jumped forty light years; wagons, props, animals—and ten feet of muddy topsoil from the field.

It was only natural that everybody should think of Doc Jordan and want to have immediate audience with him. Doc knew everything, or if he didn't, he always had an explanation for everything. But there was no sudden rush because, while it was evident that something impossibly strange had happened, the new surroundings were so unnatural that nobody wanted to make the first move. Circus people

are immensely superstitious and afraid of the unnatural.

Even before the wagons stopped, it was obvious that they had been bewitched. The muddy field, already beginning to steam under an orange sun, was now a plateau, ten feet higher than the ochre sands that stretched to all the horizons. If Big John had not been quick to react the lead wagon would have pitched over the ten-foot drop. And if their sudden lofty isolation was not sufficient evidence of witchcraft, there were the new ghastly colours of the wagons which had been gaudily resplendent in blue and gold and scarlet, but now seemed daubed in blacks and greys like the time Big John had experimented with sodium vapour lighting and given it up for that very reason.

The circus owner was the first to leave his wagon and seek out Doc Jordan. He was rough and tough, had no education to speak of and was indistinguishable from most of the riggers in his employ. None of these things made him any less the boss. He was real circus people. He had come up the hard way. His staff had nothing but respect for him. Yet he wasn't too self-important to ask advice when faced with a situation which he believed somebody else could deal with better than he could.

He found Jordan where he expected to find him—in the

freak wagon with Kino and Villem and Mario, and the Fat Lady, who was Mrs. Mario, and Elise who was really a man with long hair and a high voice, and was such a misfit in the world that when he got the job as the Bearded Woman he had gladly given up the world and rooted himself in the only perfect niche he had ever found.

Circus people are clean, neat and methodical. Inspect any wagon and it will be found as spick and orderly as any room in a five-star hotel. But don't pick on Mario's wagon; he has too many friends and they are unanimously in favour of comfort as opposed to order.

There was a thick blue fug of tobacco smoke in the wagon when Big John entered. Eight men of assorted shapes and sizes were hunkered down on one hip in a circle. There was a five-piece fan of cards in front of each man and Jordan was holding forth on the laws of probability as regards the chances of getting a straight flush on a two-card draw. With her dainty feet dangling over the edge of a bunk on which she rested her quarter ton of flesh, Mrs. Mario was content with her knitting. A stranger might have thought from the garment on the needles that a happy event was due in the Mario family, but then a stranger would not know the sock was for Mario, who was

thirty inches high, had been married to the Fat Lady for seventeen years and loved her almost as much as Loder loved his cats. Mario was very hard on socks.

Big John pinched his nose with exaggeration. "Don't you rubes ever wear shoes?" he said. And since it is a large insult to use that word to anybody who is circus, they ignored him. Besides, the question was rhetoric; nobody in his right senses wears shoes when he is at home with friends and sitting on the floor. They continued to listen to Doc, whose flow of hifalutin words had not faltered.

Considine edged nearer the point. He said: "I've got accustomed to you rubes dodging the pull-down after every tober and I tolerate it because you're so ham-handed you'd only get in the way of them that doesn't mind a bit of work. But I sometimes wonder if you ever do anything except drink black tea and play cards."

Mario's wide mouth split his face below his button nose. "There's something else?" he cracked.

"You could look out of the windows now and again."

Doc Jordan stopped talking and the others took their cue. They looked from Doc to Big John and wondered what the play was. Doc got up, licked a finger and scrubbed a peep-hole on the glass of a window. He

went back to his place in the circle, held out a hand for one of Kino's cigarettes and accompanied the first exhalation with a non-committal: "So."

Big John handed it back. "So?" He knew from experience that the inhabitants of Mario's wagon could not be hurried or flustered. He could have said the circus was on fire and they would have finished their card game before moving. Doc was as bad as the rest of them. He had to be interested before he applied his brain. Big John thought he had him interested. He thought Doc's brain was stirring right then under the nonchalant attitude.

He gave him until halfway through the cigarette before making a direct question of it. He said: "Something's happened to the world, Doc. What d'you make of it?"

Doc looked closely at the cigarette as if he was reading a prepared speech. He spoke slowly: "Nothing wrong with the world, John. Nothing wrong with *this* world. It just isn't the one we were on a while back."

Nobody looked surprised. For one thing, if Doc said something was so, it was so. For another, the impact of his words made no impression on the shallow minds of Kino, Villem, Mario and the rest—except maybe Big John Considine. The circus boss weighed the facts like this: Doc was never

wrong; yet what Doc had just said was impossible. He refused to be surprised until the facts were reconciled with each other.

Jordan looked to Mario for his next cigarette. He intoned through the curling smoke: "That sun isn't our sun. It takes up an awful lot of sky. That means it's either very close or very big. I think Roche's law would say it couldn't be as close as it looks. So it's a big one. And deep orange—class K, at a guess."

It wasn't much of an explanation for simple minds. Villem, the eight-foot giant, clapped his great hands and laughed delightedly. But Villem seldom understood a word that Doc said and got all his pleasure from the way Doc could string words together and make music of them.

When Jordan said: "Probably Arcturus," it was mostly for his own benefit.

Big John could see him withdrawing inside himself, staring on one of his long thinks which nobody could share and during which he was unreachable. Big John caught him before he got too far. He said: "You're nuts!" He didn't mean it, but it was a good stopper.

Doc didn't answer until he had gone over to the window for another look outside. "Looks exactly like it should according to all the books. Of course, the

books could be wrong—nobody's ever been there."

Big John relaxed. "Us neither, eh?"

Doc tilted his head. "No, we've done it all right."

"We never done nothing!" said Considine. "We pulled down, packed up and started to leave the field——"

"——and the field left Earth."

The door of Mario's wagon was jerked open. Half the circus crew were there, with Ma Lee at the front. They all started shouting at once in a score of languages, all asking Big John and Doc for some explanation. Doc fished a cigarette out of Considine's shirt pocket. He went to the open door, put his feet down a couple of steps and sat on the stoop. If there was any imperiousness about the action it was accidental; none was intended and none observed. It was just Doc's way.

He pointed to the monster sun and they followed his sign. "That's a sun," he said. "Same as ours but bigger. It serves the same function. It gives life to this world, which is a planet like Earth, but probably as different as the two suns are. However, it is not so different that it doesn't have air we can breathe. You didn't notice that, did you? None of you noticed he could still breathe. You were too busy worrying

about the things that are different to see the things that are the same."

At the front of the crowd there were nods. As Ma Lee translated for the benefit of Tina and Toni, the fliers who were behind her, the nods spread. Toni passed Doc's wisdom to Seppi, his catcher. From Seppi it went to the seven Mings, who spat rapid Chinese to each other and then twisted their tongues around other dialects as they passed the word to the Indian Death Diver, the Viennese horse riders, the elephant girls, riggers, bandsmen, everybody who was now crowding round the steps of Mario's wagon.

Doc enlarged on his theme. "We haven't lost anything that matters, so why worry? We've got air and light and heat. Who wants to bet me there isn't food to eat and water to drink not too far away from this spot we've been dumped in? Don't be afraid because of what has happened. Try to remember all the things that are the same as on Earth. We'll get out of here sooner or later. If you remember what I've said, your stay will be easier. Just think of it as a new tober."

The impending panic was squashed. They had sufficient belief in Doc to still their wildest fears. But a ripple of uneasiness remained. Ma Lee put it into words.

"Why did it happen?" she asked. "Who did it?"

Doc blew a stream of smoke towards the orange sun. He stubbed the butt on the wagon step. He said: "We should know the answer to both questions pretty soon. We weren't brought here for nothing. Our hosts should be arriving to receive us at any moment."

"Hosts?" asked Ma Lee.

"They'll be human," Doc assured. "Everything on this planet is rigged for human life and that's how they'll be."

The confirmation of his prediction was uncannily swift in coming. He was correct on all points except one—the host was singular. Human, male, but only one of him. He appeared suddenly on the bottom step of Mario's wagon, in the small space between Ma Lee and Doc Jordan. His skin was the same ochre hue as the soil of his planet.

He said welcome in twenty languages, one for every nationality in the circus.

There was a little moment of absolute silence as shock and surprise suspended breath and tongue and limb. In the silence everybody heard Mrs. Mario saying: "Here's one sock, Mario," and it was the breaking of the silence that unfroze the tableau. There was a push and a scamper to get away from the alien. The backward surge only compressed

the crowd at first. Then they broke into small groups that burst from the flanks and scattered quickly. The women ran all the way to the security of their wagons. The men saved face with each other by remaining in their doorways. But there was nobody within thirty feet of the alien except Doc Jordan and the inmates of Mario's wagon.

Doc looked at his empty hands and wondered who had any cigarettes. He sighed, put his hands on his knees and pushed himself erect. The move brought him face to face with the alien. He pretended to see him for the first time.

He said: "Well, well."

And behind him, Big John and the others were afraid, because that was one of Doc's strongest phrases and indicated that even he was surprised. They knew then that his display of insouciance had been for the benefit of the rest of the circus and themselves, to keep them calm. They didn't know that it had also been to prevent any precipitate action which might have resulted in retaliation by the alien. They didn't know the respect Doc had for anyone who could transport two hundred humans, a hundred beasts and fifty wagons from Earth to a planet in another solar system all in a blink.

Doc turned into Mario's wag-

on with deliberate slowness. Over his shoulder, he casually told the alien to follow him. He guessed the puce-coloured Arc-turan would have followed him in any case, but there was satisfaction in giving an order.

In the artificial light inside the trailer, Doc's complexion lost the unwashed look imparted by the orange sun outside. The alien stayed the same colour. And from that colour and the complete lack of expression on his face, Doc mentally dubbed him The Stoneman. He took his place on the floor between Kino and Rioja, the Spanish Fire Eater, who was not a freak like the rest, but liked the company; he would bet on the date of his own mother's death.

Big John Considine saw there was no room for him in the circle. He crossed to the bunk and sat next to Mrs. Mario, who was still engrossed in knitting a sock to match the one Mario was wearing on one foot. The alien was left standing. Doc thought the subtle hint of occlusion couldn't have been done better if it had been planned. He cadged a cigarette from Hunza, the Tattooed Man.

"Are you the only inhabitant?" he asked the alien.

"We are many," came the answer. The voice was as flat and expressionless as the face.

Doc was looking at Rioja but he was addressing the alien behind him when he asked: "Isn't it risky for you to come among us alone? There are two hundred of us, only one of you."

"You exaggerate. Your number one hundred eighty-six. And there is no risk."

Doc looked round his friends. Mario, Hunza, Kino and Rioja were out of the question. And Villem, for all his size, was gentle as a baby and cried when the wagon wheels crushed a daisy. Doc nodded to a short square man who was built like a cube.

"Loupiac," Doc said, and the coffee-coloured son of a French father and Negro mother got to his feet. Loupiac came from Haiti. He was the circus Strong Man. His shortness deceived the rubes everywhere. Doc and the freaks were not above taking side bets about his strength.

Loupiac wound his way round the squatting circle to the alien. He put his hands on the Stoneman's arms, just above the elbows. The alien made no move to stop him. Loupiac lifted him easily, stretched his arms and held the alien over his head. He moved his feet, preparing to whirl his victim dizzy.

He moved his feet again—this time to steady himself, like he did when he had the thousand pound bar at the top of a snatch-and-press. His eyes popped and

rolled in their sockets like boiled eggs. Sweat poured from the narrow margin of brow beneath his crinkly hair. His knees bent.

Doc knew how big in the heart Loupiac was. "Don't kill yourself," he warned. "Yield."

"Not yet," Loupiac groaned. The veins on his thick neck stood out like feeder cables up the sides of the big top. He managed to make a straight line of his legs again. But his arms were giving. The alien's weight was on his head. His neck creaked audibly.

"Yield," said Doc again.

Loupiac's breath exploded out and he dropped his arms. The intolerably heavy alien remained in mid air. He had discarded his weight as quickly as he had assumed it.

It was too much for Loupiac's self control. He ignored Doc's warning. He pulled the alien down and enveloped him in a crushing bear-hug. In the side-show, he flattened oil drums like that. But the sudden ominous cracking sound was the sound of the Strong Man's own ribs caving in. He released the alien and staggered to a bunk.

Doc jumped to his feet. He slashed the alien's face with his open hand. Mario and the rest were amazed and afraid. They had never seen Doc get angry before.

"Was that necessary?" he asked the alien.

"I did nothing," the Stoneman defended himself. "As the ambassador for my people, may I say that we intend you no harm. We shall at no time do anything which will, directly, hurt or kill any of you. If you do get hurt, it will be your own doing. You have had one object lesson."

Doc Jordan's thin features were still flushed. He said: "You knew he would hurt himself—you could have stopped him."

"I could have, but the lesson had to be demonstrated sooner or later."

"Just to show us how almighty powerful you are," Doc said. "If you think one kick in the rump is going to stop us making any more tries, you're awful mistaken, Mister Stoneman. I don't know about your race, but the human race doesn't react that way. If it did, it would never have risen out of the slime. It's a funny thing—our progress had always been in leaps and bounds. For long periods we just jog along. But whenever we're up against it, be it fire or flood, famine or disease, that's when we begin to fight. And we always come out of the fight one step higher up the ladder of progress."

"We have observed your . . . progress," the alien said.

"You couldn't have looked very closely, else you wouldn't have started anything." Doc had his dander up. He made a speech

of it. "You didn't drag us all this way—where is it, Arcturus?—to see a free show. In spite of your assertion that you mean no harm, I don't think you mean us any good, either. And I warn you here and now that whatever you intend doing with us, won't be easy. Sure, you've got them all scared at this instant with the big jump from Earth and your sudden appearance from nowhere, but they'll get over it. For the moment, they're the rubes, watching somebody else's tricks, but they'll wake up."

He took another breath and started in again. "A circus is pretty much like our world. There are a lot of different nationalities, a lot of different animals. And this circus will react like our world would in an emergency. There will be fear and panic at first, any action will be disunited and unorganised. Then we'll get wise to ourselves, we'll get together and pool our resources, we'll fight back as one. So far we don't know your strength, only a little of it. We'll find out. We'll find your weaknesses, too. And when we've found them, we'll show you our strength. Oh no, Mister Stoneman, don't think one demonstration of force will stop us trying again. Because we have learned from our own history that you don't know what you can do till you try!"

He squatted on the floor again.

His hands were trembling a little. He was slightly ashamed of letting his passion run away with his tongue. He didn't raise his eyes to his friends' faces.

He needn't have worried. They hadn't understood a quarter of what he had said, but they did understand that he had been fighting. Villem the Giant had tears of admiration in his eyes. He clapped. The others thrust their cigarettes on Doc.

The alien was unworried. He said: "I repeat that if you are hurt in any way it will be your own doing. Running your head into a brick wall is the expression, I believe. We know you are a brave and resourceful people, but do not waste your time trying retaliative measures. As I said, we are many."

Doc was a lot cooler now. He answered quietly: "I'll remember that. You remember what I said about a circus being like our world."

"But of course," said the alien. "That is why you were selected." And he was gone.

There was no night. From the slow drag of the orange sun across the sky, Doc calculated the planet's day to be about five times as long as a terrestrial day. He put this down to the slow rotation of the planet due to the enormous gravitational pull of the giant sun. It was next day on the

terrestrial scale of reckoning that the trouble started in earnest.

Poker had not been mentioned since breakfast and Doc was lying on one of Mario's bunks, his hands interlocked under his head. He appeared to be contemplating the ceiling. Big John's entry put a stop to it.

"He's back," Big John announced. "Somebody's going to get hurt."

Doc rolled his head to see Considine. "What does he want?" he asked.

"The animals. One of each."

"What for?"

"He didn't say. He just said no harm would come to them and they would be returned later."

"Let him have them then."

Big John scowled. "But I thought you . . . well, after what you said to him yesterday——"

Doc propped himself on one elbow. "I said we would fight back, yes. But I didn't say when. We don't know any more about him than we knew yesterday. It's too soon to begin resistance. Besides, I think he means what he says. He won't hurt the beasts if he can help it."

"I wish you'd tell that to Loder. The Stoneman wants to take Shad the Third."

Doc got off the bunk smartly and hung a leather jerkin over his shoulders. "That's different," he said.

Loder had five cats. The older pair of lions had been passed into his care from the circus's last trainer. They remembered the wire-tipped whip and the goad at the end of the stick. They remembered these and credited Loder with the same cruel devices, a fact which never ceased to hurt him. The other pair tolerated him; they did his bidding but otherwise ignored him. It was their son, Shad the Third, bred in captivity, who returned all Loder's love, with interest. Shad and Loder would have died for each other. It was a pity the alien had asked for Shad.

There was a fierce argument going on outside the cat cage when Doc and Big John got there. Loder was shouting at the alien in his native tongue. The alien was answering quietly in the same language. He switched to English when he saw Doc.

He said: "Will you persuade this person that I intend to have the youngest animal and that he is powerless to stop me? Tell him that, if necessary, I could transport the animal from here to its destination, cage and all, without lifting a finger—and without permission."

"Why the hell don't you?" Doc said. "It would save a lot of trouble."

The Stoneman's expression did not change. His only reaction was to pause slightly before answering,

as if Doc's lack of perception had momentarily bereft him of speech.

He said: "It is right to ask permission. That is what you would do, is it not?"

"You didn't ask our permission before abducting us from Earth," Doc reminded him. "And for God's sake don't go through any farce of trying to act as we would, or as you think we would. I don't like the comparison. We've seen what you can do, so just go ahead and do it instead of upsetting everybody."

If anyone can convey a shrug without moving a muscle, the alien did, Doc thought. He was learning to interpret the eye-to-eye stares and the silences. The alien gave him a stare for a full five seconds before turning his attention to Shad the Third. An instant later the young lion disappeared. And one each of every species of animal in the circus disappeared at the same time.

Loder's face was terrible to watch. His eyes searched every corner of the cage. He counted the four remaining cats over and over but failed to make five of them. The pain in his eyes almost occluded the question in them when he looked at Doc. But Doc saw the question and answered it with a nod.

With the confirmation of his suspicion that the alien was responsible for the disappearance

of Shad the Third, Loder became unrecognisable. Gone was Loder the quiet, the patient, the gentle. In his place was a mindless killing machine. He swept Doc aside with his left arm. From his right hand the eighteen-foot whip-lash uncoiled and writhed on the sand with a life of its own. He made a wide arc with his hand and the lash snaked into the air.

It can be proved mathematically that the tip of a striking whip moves with infinite velocity. The crack of the whip is a practical demonstration of the tip breaking through the sound barrier. But as the tip of Loder's whip sought out the alien's eyes, it could have been looping through the air tied to the tail of a lazy butterfly—the Stoneman pinched it between two fingers, tugged the whip from Loder's grasp and tossed it away.

Loder wasn't a relaxed type like Doc and Mario and the freaks. He was never anything but fully dressed—right down to the leather leggings and revolver. He had never used the gun, would have been horrified at the thought of using it. Its purpose was to excite the rubes and to satisfy the safety regulations in some states.

The cat trainer snarled worse than any of his charges as he drew the gun and pumped the chambers empty. About six inches in front of the alien, the bullets stopped and fell like leaden raindrops.

Doc stepped in to save Loder from himself. He was obviously intent on a physical assault on the Stoneman and Doc guessed who would come off worst. He clipped Loder scientifically and folded him against a wagon wheel.

He stopped the cat trainer but he was too late to extinguish the fuse of anger that was burning towards explosive riot. Fury was giving birth to courage. It had only needed someone to start retaliative action to rouse the rest. Doc didn't think he could stop them. For his own safety, he made space between the alien and himself.

There was a surge towards the Stoneman. Every hand had found a weapon—a sidepole, a guy-hook, a hammer, a hayfork. Up front was Primo Zecca with a fan of twelve-inch throwing knives. Primo could split a card edgewise from twenty feet. He made the knives slash through the air so fast they were like a continuous band of metal, spangled with orange light from the onlooking sun.

The knives should have clustered in the alien's heart. But they fell to his feet as heavily as Loder's bullets—all except the last one, which hovered a handspan in front of his chest. Doc wasn't watching anything except the alien's face and although the expression was neutral, he thought he detected a fleeting sign of

insolent humour. He wondered if he was getting psychic.

He chalked himself a credit mark when he saw the hovering knife turn slowly until the blade was pointing at Primo. The knife-thrower whipped a hatchet from his belt and continued to advance on the alien. The suspended knife stabbed out menacingly.

Primo skirted to the right of it. The knife jabbed to the right. Primo side-stepped it with a beautiful foot movement. He had been on the wire for many years before the accident which had put him in a plaster jacket. The knife prodded at him whichever direction he tried to attack from.

He stood still. The knife was still. He raised the hatchet as if to throw it. He appeared to remember the alien's ability to stop flying objects and changed his mind. He slashed the hatchet at the knife instead. The ring of metal on metal could be heard above the shouts of the crowd, even above the scream of pain from Primo as he clasped his shattered wrist.

The knife had not budged a millimetre.

Most animals never learn when to accept defeat. The dumber ones don't know enough to stop defying death; the bull in the arena charges at his tormentors to the last. The human animal is not much different. It continues

to charge but it grows more cunning with each attempt.

No more weapons were thrown at the alien. By unspoken assent, the circus people spread out and around until they had the alien encircled. Then they started to close in. Doc wondered if and how the alien would manage to deal with over a hundred blows beating at him at once.

He got no answer this time. The alien disappeared.

Doc wondered if it was discretion. He thought the answer should have been a hundred more broken wrists. He also thought there was some hidden significance in the alien's abrupt departure after each demonstration of power. He tucked the fact into the back of his mind beside a few others he had been collecting.

The next day a man, a woman and a child of each sex vanished from the tober. There was no hullabaloo because the alien did his kidnapping without putting in an appearance. The tentman, his wife and two children vanished as mysteriously as the whole circus had vanished from the surface of Earth. A lot of the steam went out of the others. They were afraid again.

And when the alien did show up the day after that, Doc thought how good a psychologist he was to have put fear back into the

people before walking among them again.

The Stoneman asked for Doc.

"It will soon be night," the alien said, and Doc verified the statement with a glance at the sun, blood-red above the horizon. He had already checked his calculations that the planetary day was five times the customary length and that it had been twenty-four hours old on their arrival on the planet. He waited to see why the alien had picked him to discuss the twilight with.

"By your standards," said the Stoneman, "it will be a long night. We realise your supplies may be running short and that it will be difficult and dangerous to forage in the dark."

"Kind of you to think of us once in a while."

"Therefore," the alien continued, unruffled, "therefore, I have brought you supplies." He waved his hands like Rom Rudd doing the three-shell trick for the acquisition of rube gelt and all around him appeared bales of what looked like hay, and piles of assorted fruits.

"Quite a trick," Doc commented. "About five tons of fodder just like that——" He snapped his fingers.

"I am taking samples of your produce in return."

"If they let you."

"That was said without thought. Without reason, too, I suspect.

You know as well as I do they will not attempt to stop me. I do not understand why you said it."

"Pique, sheer pique. You *wouldn't* understand."

The alien's voice hardened slightly but perceptibly. "You have made a great deal of talk about me not understanding you and your people. How much do you understand of this?"

The piles of Arcturan fodder were partnered by heaps of Terran produce. Hams, loaves, a side of horseflesh, cheeses, beer, bird seed, dried fish, beans—a representative selection right down to the salt and pepper and veterinary cod liver oil. It stayed there long enough for Doc to get a good eye-ful, then it was gone. Doc didn't have the slightest doubt that it had followed the representative selection of animal and human life.

"You're full of tricks," he said to the alien. "But we have some, too. You were wrong about us not understanding you. For instance, I'll bet you're just itching to finish this conversation and get moving—back to wherever you hang out."

It was a guess, one of the suspicions he had collected. It depended on the alien's reaction for its confirmation.

The Stoneman stared hard at Doc, torn between his desire to leave and his unwillingness to betray his weakness. "There are

many of us," was the best he could flourish in the way of warnings. Doc smiled when he vanished, and went to Mario's wagon to drum up the first poker game in days.

Doc Jordan held no degrees. His title was purely honorary, conferred on him in the forgotten past by the circus people on account of his general erudition and his faculty of being able to find an explanation for everything. If there was any title he had some right to, it was that of veterinarian. But that, too, would have been honorary because he held no official position in the circus, and for a long time had not even been on the payroll.

He had turned up at the circus about twenty years back. He would have been ten or eleven then, a scrawny, pinched, hungry kid; and anybody could see the hunger was not only for food. He hung around the tober for the whole week of the stand. Time and again the grooms or tentmen found him sleeping in the horse stalls or among the quarter canvases of the one-pole tent that was kept spare for when the circus was allocated a field too small for the big top.

He was still with the circus at the next tober and Big John bawled out the tentmen for not spotting the stowaway, but they answered in their rights that they

had searched properly and the kid must have travelled in the cat wagon and how could anybody expect them to think of looking there?

Big John took Jordan to his own wagon. He fed him before he said anything; Big John had the soft heart of all circus people. When the kid had eaten, he wandered round the wagon, fingering the brasses, tracing the pipe from the canned gas bottle to the stove with great interest, ogling his way through Big John's scrapbook of news cuttings and photographs. The circus boss tagged him as just another circus-crazy kid, drawn by the superficial glamour of the bright lights and the gaudy paints and the grotesque make-ups. He gave Jordan a fatherly lecture about the hard work, the nomadic life and how he should go back home and forget all about the circus. But he had misinterpreted the hunger in Jordan's eyes.

Doc didn't go home. He was never heard to mention home. At the next tober, and the one after that, he was always to be found—although there wasn't a hand who wasn't prepared to swear on oath that he hadn't been around when the wagons were searched. He was nowhere at the pull-down but next tenting he was always there; helping with the quarter-poles, or grooming the horses, or feeding hot milk

to a sick dog, or pouring a quart of turpentine into an elephant with the bellyache. Mostly he was with the animals.

He got one meal here, another there, usually from the women. They did it surreptitiously at first. Then when it got to look as if there was no way of getting rid of him, they arranged an unwritten rota. Ma Lee—she was young and busty, and the queen of the circus in those days—she knitted him a sweater to cover up the goose-pimples that showed through the rents of his shirt. Somebody else found him a spare pair of jeans and so it went on. Time passed and he was one of the circus.

Since he had a way with animals, Big John permitted him to be acting vet. His duties were as unofficial as his status. Yet there was always somebody to see that he did not want. Eventually Big John gave him his keep.

He had an incessant thirst for knowledge and although books and any other reading matter are as hard to find in a circus as a half-crown in Australia, he never lacked for something to read. The more he read, the wiser he became. And when it became apparent that his opinions and advice were almost infallible, he became the resident oracle. He became Doc.

Mario wriggled his toes against

Doc's foot. "I asked for two cards," he said.

"Sorry," Doc apologised. "I was thinking. What did you want?"

"Two cards. A five and a king."

Villem and Rioja packed in. Elise waggled his beard through one nervous raise but dropped out next round with Kino, Hunza and Loupiac. The play was between Doc and Mario. Doc wasn't much in the mood. He let Mario call him.

"Two pairs and a bull," he said.

Mario grinned and spread out three kings and a pair of fives. "Ask and ye shall receive," he said. Mario usually won. He had fantastic luck. His luck had never bothered Doc before. Now it did.

"Did you get a five and a king on the draw?"

"Just as I asked."

Doc picked a cigarette out of the pile of Mario's winnings. He said: "Did you really know they were coming up?"

"I guessed."

"You've done it before?"

"Pretty often. I'm not always right, but I hit the mark enough times to get by."

Doc took a pencil stub from his jerkin and asked Mario to name the entire pack as he turned the cards. He kept the score on the margins of the joker. The results weren't very good. Mario said it wasn't the same as when playing poker. Doc told him to

try again and to pretend it was poker—with a fifty-two card draw.

Mario got ten right. They tried a third time and the score went up to fourteen. Mrs. Mario got off her bunk, a thing she seldom did, for her legs weren't built to carry her avoirdupois. She brought Mario two aspirins and a glass of water. He accepted them and nodded.

Doc marvelled at the way people can get so familiar with each other's company that they get blind to habits which a stranger would raise his eyebrows at. With a sudden understanding, he remembered the countless number of times he had seen Mrs. Mario anticipate her dwarf husband's needs and yet had failed to see the obvious.

"Mrs. Mario," Doc said urgently. "Sit in with Mario on this game. See if you can help him guess the cards."

In six tries, the combination clocked an average of thirty-two correct guesses, over sixty per cent. Mario did the calling. His wife's role was obscure, but she had to be near him to make him guess better.

"As I said," Doc commented, "you don't know what you can do till you try!"

That night they sat and talked for six hours, eleven makings of strong black tea and eighty-seven cigarettes. As usual, Doc did most of the talking, the others

only filling in with questions. They were content as long as Doc was spinning words. Which was just as well, because that night they understood less of what he was saying than usual. Not that it mattered much—Doc talked more for the sake of helping to arrange his thoughts than anything else.

He told them the circus had been snatched from Earth to the Arcturan planet by telekinesis. He had to explain what telekinesis was. Having convinced them that it was possible to think an object from one place to another he showed how all the Stoneman's actions could be shorn of terror if that single fact was known and accepted.

Kino the clown did Doc's words the honour of active thought. He said: "This alien snaffled the beasts and the tentman and his family the same way—that I get. But what about what he did to Loupiac?"

The Strong Man rubbed his ribs in recollection.

Doc said: "He was propelling himself downwards. That had the same effect as increasing his weight. When Loopy buckled, he exerted an antigravitational influence and remained suspended."

"What about my ribs?" Loupiac asked. "It was like grappling with a block of granite."

"In effect," Doc agreed. "Actually he was only repelling your

bear-hug with an equal force. He's quick, too. Quick enough to stop bullets and knives."

There was gloom again. Even Villem the giant felt it sufficiently to ask one of the few pertinent questions of his life. He said: "What he want with us, anyhow, Doc?"

"I'm going to ask him that question."

"He ain't here," said Villem.

"I'll find him."

"In the dark?" asked Mario.

"I'll find him. Before I go, I've got something I want you to do, something for nearly everybody in the circus to do. Your job, Mario, is to practice guessing. Try it with everything in the wagon, not just cards. Kino, you others, help him. Rig up all sorts of guessing games for Mario. You've got five days of darkness with nothing else to do. I'll expect some results when I get back."

They were anxious at the thought of his going. He assured them that nothing could happen to them until the next Arcturan day.

He went round the circus, knocking on wagon doors, rousing the artistes from sleep. To each he gave instructions. He had no sleep himself. Darkness was complete when he slid down the ten-foot drop of terran soil to the surface of the alien planet and stepped blindly into the night.

It was rough going and would

have been a lot rougher if the ground had not been so flat. He stumbled a dozen times and fell twice in the first hundred yards. He began to wonder if the alien's alarm system was as efficient as he had expected it to be. He kept on grimly and hoped he wasn't going in circles.

The first sign that he had been detected came when he had almost given up hope and his knees were bleeding from repeated falls. He felt a resistance to his forward movement, like walking into a loose canvas. He forced himself through the resistance.

A few steps further on, he met it again, and again he was able to push himself forward. Twice more he broke the alien telekinetic barrier. Then he was lifted and carried forward. There was no sensation of being lifted or let down, but he knew he had been moved because he could now see the lights of buildings. He kept on walking.

He thought a solitary guard, half asleep, had been responsible for the imperfect barrier. When Doc had forced his way through the barrier, help had been summoned and he had been teleported. Doc expected that with the summoning of further help, they would be able to lift him to his destination.

It was a feeble effort when it came. They got him into the building but dropped him when

he was a few inches above the floor. There were three of them, all younger in appearance than the familiar Stoneman. They looked very sleepy.

"Fetch your ambassador," Doc said. "Fetch the one who has spoken with me three times."

They looked towards the wide staircase. The alien Doc knew was coming down—actually walking down. He looked sleepier than the others.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

"Did I? Who says I wasn't just taking a stroll?"

"You were coming in this direction."

"A lucky guess on my part. Or have you forgotten that we don't know where you hang out or how far away? How far is it, anyhow?"

"More than three days walk at your speed."

"Thanks for the lift," Doc said. He went on: "You know, I guessed I would find you something like this. Tired and exhausted. If I had known exactly how low you would be, I would have taken the circus with me and you wouldn't have stood much chance in a straight fight, would you? That's why you were careful to plant us so far away—so we couldn't steal a march on you and catch you napping, literally napping."

The alien made a gesture to the

three guards. They must have put their tired minds together for Doc found himself and the quartet of aliens in a room that couldn't have been anything but a dining room, even if there was nothing on the great table except dirty crockery. The aliens cleared a space on the table with their hands and used their telekinetic abilities to fill the space with food.

They ate like pigs. While they gorged themselves, Doc did some eye-filling. He could see that the building had been splendid in its day; but this wasn't the day. It was palatial, built on the grand scale with wide floors and high walls. It had been built to last, which perhaps explained its continued existence despite the signs of obvious neglect. The walls were cracked and layered with dust. The stone floor of the dining room was chipped and broken under the slime of food debris.

"Your trouble," Doc said, "is that you misused a gift. You developed your telekinetic powers so much that you either forgot what manual labour was or spurned to use it. We've got a reptile cage cleaner than this."

The Stoneman took no umbrage. Surprisingly, he agreed with Doc. "We realise that, but it is too late to change our ways. That is why we are taking over your world."

Doc grinned ruefully. "There——" he said. "You've stolen my best line. I had it all worked out that you wanted the Earth. I even had some idea of your motives. I came here to see how right I was."

"Interesting," said the alien. He looked his old self again, full of confidence, superiority and insolence. He dismissed the guards and asked Doc: "What are these ideas of yours?"

Doc picked up a scrap of food that the aliens had missed. He nibbled it and found it as tasteless as the supplies that had been brought to the circus.

"I'll go back to the beginning," he said. "You can tell me when I go wrong and fill in on the bare patches. The beginning was when you first developed telekinetic powers and discovered you could move things around by thinking them so instead of having to use your muscles. Not you personally, of course. This must have been generations ago. It must be a good talent to have, if used right. You didn't. You developed it to the maximum, to the extent where you could, by thinking collectively, teleport across the wastes of space. But you neglected everything else. How am I doing?"

"Sad and self-evident truths."

Doc sat on the edge of the table. He continued: "Many generations later your people discovered another truth that

should have been equally self-evident—you get *nothing* for *nothing*. Even a talent must be paid for. The price of yours was the wealth of your soil. Telekinesis requires tremendous mental activity. Any dietary primer will tell you that mental workers need more calories than manual labourers. You woke up one day to discover you had eaten yourself off the face of your planet. Right?"

"Very good, if not entirely correct. There is another factor. Our planet is tragically short of trace elements."

Doc snapped his fingers. "Of course," he murmured. "The more you ate, the more food you had to grow. And the more you grew, the smaller the crops became. I imagine you know enough about fertilisers to feed the soil, but you couldn't replace trace elements when you had none available and it was too late to start a recovery programme. So the crops became poorer and poorer until today you are faced with the choice of extinction or emigration. And because you've lost the ability to work, you have no choice but to take over a planet with a ready-made economy. In a word—Earth."

The alien commented: "For your sakes, it is a pity such a clever race has not developed mental powers of its own. In spite of your cleverness, there is

nothing you can do to stop us taking your planet."

"Don't be too sure about it," Doc said quietly.

"Is that a threat?"

"Let's call it a warning. For instance, we know now that we can catch you and beat you easily when it is your night, because after a whole day of using your minds at full throttle you are spent and weak and barely able to teleport yourselves out of danger. It was you, incidentally, who gave the game away. I wondered why you always disappeared after a telekinetic display and came to the conclusion that you were getting out of the way before somebody discovered that you had just about shot your bolt. I think you came back here to guzzle until your mind was refuelled."

"Quite remarkable," said the alien. "—for a Terran," he qualified. "But of course it is now too late to put your knowledge to use, to steal a march on us as you put it. We shall maintain a double watch for the rest of the night. And when tomorrow comes—it will be all over."

"So soon!" Even the phlegmatic Doc couldn't keep the anxiety out of his voice.

"We have completed all our tests. The man whom we borrowed was able to eat all our native foods without any ill effects; his wife and children are equally safe.

Finding suitable fodder for the different animals was not so easy, but we are happy to inform you that they can subsist on this world. We transplanted grasses and did speeded germination tests on the seeds which we took and we are positive that you will be able to grow your crops in our soil. Our preliminary investigators have already confirmed that we can eat off your land; the samples of food you . . . donated, they convinced the seniors about the investigators' reports."

Doc couldn't quite make out how genuine the alien's air of solicitude was. The Stoneman had picked the circus as being a compact sample of Earth's human and animal life. They intended a big swap: Earth for the aliens and the Arcturan planet for the displaced Terrans. They appeared to have taken great pains to see that nobody would suffer. But their solicitude was marked with about as much personal feeling as a chess player shows when moving his king out of check.

"You really mean it, don't you?" said Doc. "You really believe you're bending over backwards to make sure Earth's population will be able to survive here?"

"We have honour," the alien answered in a tone that showed they also had hauteur.

"Maybe. You haven't much

foresight though. What's going to happen to us when our crops come up stunted? And where do you go next when you've eaten yourselves off the Earth?"

The alien answered: "Your rate of food consumption is about one twentieth of ours, per capita. You will still be able to exist. On the other hand your population is fifty times as large. The solution is obvious but it is for your people to put into effect. As to your second question, your soil is sufficiently fertile to supply us with all we need for several millennia."

Doc thought about making an issue of the fact that most plants are heliotropic and that Terran plants would probably die of a crick in the neck through staring at the oversized sun for five days on end. He thought about warning the alien that his crops would die of apoplexy due to the quintupled rate at which day followed night on Earth. But he was tired of arguing with the alien and worried about the proximity of the proposed change-over.

"Tomorrow?" he said.

"There is nothing to wait for except the full restoration of our powers. Now I must send you back to your friends. I, too, must rest."

"My heart bleeds for you."

"Excuse?"

"Skip it." Doc forced himself to keep all belligerence out of his

voice. He adopted a wheedlin^g tone.

"You are honourable men," he said, feeling like Antony in the forum. "Will you do a most honourable thing? Will you delay the change-over until the fifth day of tomorrow—until evening by your time?"

The alien hesitated. "I do not have the authority to grant such a request on my own. Perhaps, if you can give me cogent reasons for doing so, I can persuade the seniors to agree."

Doc took a deep breath. "To you, we are a statistical sample. To ourselves, we are still a circus. All those people, the animals, too, are artistes. They are exhibitionists. The whole purpose of their lives is to perform, to show off their unusual abilities. In their stay here they have been frustrated. It would be a great honour if you would permit us to give a complete performance before some of your people as an audience."

"It would be an honour for you?" The alien did not follow.

Doc oiled his tongue. "We have performed before all the crowned heads on Earth, before all the presidents and dictators. It is considered a great honour to perform before our superiors."

"But in the evening our strength would be at an ebb again——"

Doc had hoped the alien would miss that point. He said: "You can rest all through the day."

"And be attacked?"

"I will give you my word that no attempt will be made to attack you. Besides, it is too far. We couldn't get here in time. If you're not prepared to accept my word, you can post guards."

From what few signs Doc could see, the alien appeared to be satisfied. "It depends on the seniors," he said. "It is a great honour?" he asked for confirmation.

"A great honour," Doc said solemnly. "You may tell the seniors that I will see to it that they are given ringside seats, the most important vantage points. I will also take them on a conducted tour of the sideshows and sit among them during the circus performance. That is our practice when entertaining royalty."

The alien was tiring again. He wanted his sleep. "Very well," he said. "I will put your request forward. But I doubt if the idea of being entertained will have any great appeal. According to our investigators, entertainment seems to be a purely Terran custom, a decadent foible of a people with too much leisure. We have no time for it."

Doc wondered in which sense the last remark was made. He decided it was meant literally; the aliens had a full-time job in raising sufficient crops. And although the Stoneman sounded discouraging and apathetic, Doc

had a notion his words had masked a certain amount of eagerness and jealousy. He thought the aliens would come to the show.

Before he was dismissed and sent back to the circus, the Stoneman had one last question for him. He said: "Why do you stipulate that the entertainment shall be at the end of our day?"

Doc assumed a look of surprise. "Because the artistes must practise, of course, and the big top has to be raised. That will give us five of our days to get ready."

He didn't mention that most of the tricks would be new.

Counting the remainder of the Arcturan night, they actually had nine days in which to get ready. They practised the tricks Doc asked for with a ferocity that would have made the aliens tremble if they had seen them. The little personal feuds that exist in every closed community were forgotten as the circus welded itself into a unit with one single aim—the overthrow of the aliens. Normally, circus and sideshow people do not get on very well together; the former regard the latter as outsiders and call them gypsies, although the Roman element has ceased to travel with the circus for many decades. But under Doc's influence, all distinctions were erased, temporarily, at least.

When the sun was well past meridian they began the tenting.

Slats, bolts and canvases were assembled into sideshow stalls with glib precision. The sun-dried pitch still bore the marks of the last stand and the erection of the big top was quicker than usual. The king-poles were pulled into their perpendicular pride, the side-poles were staked, then the quarter-poles; canvases were unrolled, draped, seams joined and guys secured; feeder cables, strings of lights were carried up the sides of the big top and tied to the heads of the king-poles; the ropes, wires and bars for the fliers were fixed and tested; the ring blocks were dovetailed to make a circle, the sawdust was spread.

And the big top was ready for the rubes to arrive.

In Mario's wagon the activity was unseemly, certainly unheard of. Mrs. Mario was sewing the last of thousands of twenty-three millimetre sequins on Mario's costume. Kino was making his face hideously comical with wet white, lampblack and carmine. Rioja was swabbing his lips and tongue with an alum solution which he had spurned to use previously but which Doc had insisted on for the new fuel he had prepared for Rioja's act. Ma Lee—never known to leave her own wagon except in the interests of love—was anxiously going over her lines with Mario.

Outside, Doc was everywhere at once; convincing Loder that Shad

wouldn't be kidnapped again; checking the special rifle with Gage, the sideshow man who, it was alleged, could fix a barrel to make a bullet go in circles; giving unnecessary reassurance to Tina, Toni and Seppi who were flexing their muscles like mad, but were ice-cold inside; making sure Rom Rudd knew exactly what to do.

And all the time he was keeping an eye on the alert for the arrival of his guests. He had heard nothing further from the aliens. There was no guarantee they would turn up. But he still thought they would.

The last dab of make-up was applied, the final touches were made to the costumes. Stations were taken, the artistes were ready to play their parts, the bandsmen were tuning up and shaking spittle out of the drip-valves as the cold brass condensed the moisture out of their breaths.

The waiting was hard to bear. It couldn't have been any worse if they *had* been expecting royalty. Doc went in and out of the big top a dozen times, always wondering if the aliens had arrived in whichever place he could not see.

They arrived in time to prevent nerves giving way to temper. Doc passed the signal and went to meet them.

He was relieved they had come but disappointed to see so few of them. He had expected enough to fill the big top and then some.

There was only Stoneface himself and ten older men. He surmised the rest of the local population was being kept in reserve in case the seniors needed rescuing. It wasn't going to be easy to fool the aliens; the circus would have to be good.

He welcomed the seniors with a stiff cordiality which was meant to convey obsequiousness with an underlying hint of mysterious self assurance. He couldn't tell from their expressions how it went over.

"We will start with the side-shows," he said, and led them through the flap of Ma Lee's canvas booth. Ma and little Mario were resplendent in identical sequin-spangled costumes. Mrs. Mario sat in the background, obese and immobile. Doc pointed to Ma Lee. "A soothsayer," he explained. "The little one is her son," he lied.

Poker-faces or not, he could see it didn't register. "She foretells the future," he elaborated. "The distant future she can see in the temporal orb of crystal, the more immediate future is revealed to her in the symbol cards. For a consideration she will tell anyone what is in store for them—no doubt you prefer your own soothsayers but, as our guests, perhaps you would like a reading? Free, of course."

He watched them closely. He

wondered if they would admit they had no fortune-tellers or whether they would denounce the whole thing as a patent fraud. They solved the problem by spreading the cards to study the "symbols" and by peering into Ma Lee's crystal ball.

"Glass," one of the seniors sneered. "There is nothing to be seen."

"Not to ordinary people——" Doc hesitated, but they let the slur pass. He went on: "As you know, we terrestrials have many tribes. Each has its own talent. This woman's tribe is renowned for its ability to extend its vision through the crystal into the future. The young one is still learning. If you wish a reading, I would advise the crystal. The young one can manipulate the cards too easily."

They took the bait. "Manipulate?" the original ambassador said. "Without touching them?"

"Not as well as you could," Doc said apologetically. "But to a small degree. He has much to learn yet."

"You made no mention of this before——"

"You didn't ask. Now, who will be first to learn from the crystal?"

The ambassador laid a hand on the deck of cards. "These first," he said.

Doc shrugged, took the cards from the alien and passed them to Ma Lee. He scowled ferociously

at Mario and said: "Do not interfere."

Ma Lee shuffled the cards and laid out nine of them in a long row. Mario turned his back and scribbled on a piece of paper which he handed to one of the seniors.

"From left to right," Mario said, "the symbols on the cards are these. They tell of danger, today, here, in the big top."

Ma Lee turned the cards over slowly. Mario had named them correctly. Ma swept them together and muttered darkly: "Too much black. The child interfered. He is trying to frighten us, wicked boy."

She laid out another nine cards. Again Mario made notes. He held the paper out to the same senior as before. As the puce fingers were closing on it, he whipped it back again and wrote on the reverse side. Ma Lee stacked the nine cards and clenched them tightly.

"Somebody moved them," Mario accused. "They changed the cards I had written down. I had to change my notes. This is the new order of the symbols." And Ma Lee vindicated his statement when she unpeeled the cards from her fist one by one.

"I'm sorry," Doc said. "The little one is mischievous today. But I can recommend the crystal. It is beyond his powers to change the true future as revealed to one with the seeing gift."

"Wait!" Ma said. She pointed to the outspread cards. "Whoever changed the cards to these was choosing his own fortune. The cards cannot lie. This arrangement is worse than before."

"But you said the black symbols were the foreboding ones," the Arcturan ambassador said, revealing his part in the telekinetic exchange of cards.

"The red ones mean blood!" Ma said. Doc had never seen a more fortuitous blend of hearts and diamonds and he mentally applauded Ma Lee for a nifty piece of ad-libbing.

"Blood and danger," Ma intoned. She turned to Doc. "Stop the show," she said. "The omens are bad. Too much danger."

"For whom?" a senior asked.

And Ma staged a convenient cataleptic fit, complete with a balloon of ectoplasm billowing from her mouth. Doc stepped between her and the aliens and palmed the muslin bag deftly. He put a finger across his lips to ask for silence and ushered the guests outside.

"She has sent her mind outside to try to remove the dangers she spoke of. Her body must not be disturbed until she returns." Doc caught the quick exchange of glances and credited the circus with the points for the first round.

He took them to Rom Rudd's stance. Rom was palming the pea with superlative dexterity. He

placed it under the middle shell, switched the outer shells slowly, swapped the left for the centre, the centre for the right and switched the left and right again. He lifted the centre shell to show the pea. He repeated the manoeuvre a little faster and looked up enquiringly.

Doc interpreted. "He wants you to guess which shell the pea is under."

Only the ambassador deigned to answer. "The middle one as before," he said. Rom showed the pea and nodded. He shuffled the shells again.

"Somebody else try," Doc suggested.

One of the seniors nominated the centre shell. Rom lifted it to show the bare table. He lifted the left shell to expose the pea.

"He moved it," the senior accused.

"But of course," Doc said. "That is the game—to see who has the stronger mind."

"Do it again," the senior said. "We were not prepared." Rom Rudd shuffled the shells with insolent slowness. When he stopped, the pea couldn't have been anywhere else except under the middle one. The aliens unanimously said so. But it wasn't.

"Two shells left, gentlemen," Rom said. "This one—or that one? Whichever you pick will be wrong." They concentrated and said the left one. And since they couldn't move the pea from one

shell to the other because it nestled between Rom's educated fingertips until he let it drop under the right-hand shell, they were wrong again.

Doc had to talk his fastest to prise them away from the table. Sooner or later they might have spotted the deception. He didn't say that, but told them Rom was only a half-wit with immature powers and suggested they would find better things for their delectation inside the big top.

At the sight of Doc and the aliens, the drummer started a long roll which he sustained until the party was seated. Then the whole band swung into the "Entry of the Gladiators" and the parade began, with Big John leading it in his ringmaster's costume. For the duration of every performance, Big John was always promoted to Captain Considine. He marched the circus artistes and animals round the ring and out again. Only Kino remained.

Kino was a carpet clown. His normal job was to keep the crowd happy while they were being seated and while the props were being changed between acts. He did it by climbing among the crowd, joking, teasing, cajoling.

He took one look at the empty benches and muttered to himself that the Wood Family was here again, which was circus slang for a poor house, with more timber

showing than flesh. He thought it was silly to act as if there was a full house but that was what Doc wanted. He collected two fistfuls of candyfloss and staggered across the ring, big boots and baggy trousers tripping him all the way, but as often as he fell he never let go the candyfloss. He offered the sweets with a huge painted smile.

Doc took the first one, tore off a mouthful and chewed. "Sugar," he explained. "Flavoured with the juices of some of your fruits. Perfectly harmless."

The aliens took a tuft of candyfloss each and nibbled the edges experimentally, then wolfed the rest greedily. Doc said a silent prayer of thanks. He nodded to Kino, who understood and capered off to fetch more confectionery.

The band changed tempo and played a heavily accented waltz. The ring was filled with a poem of motion as the twelve horses, six black, six white, danced to the rhythm. The girls, in feathered bras and totem-decorated soft leather panties, seemed to have their feet glued to the horses' bare backs. They went from the waltz to the Spanish walk, and then to the more difficult baguette and toe-to-pummel, which required perfect co-operation between mount and rider. The climax of their act was a grand levade — when the horses reared upwards on their hind legs. They made four

preliminary circuits of the ring, going round in single file, then in threes, two sixes, and finally charged from the far side of the ring in a solid phalanx of twelve, with the girls now astride their mounts.

It didn't seem possible they could stop in time; they must crash the ring blocks and mow down the aliens. Only at the last second did the horses dig in their forelegs and push themselves erect. It was a spectacular movement, but the team had done it so often there was never any hitch. Yet this time the girls were thrown, every one of them.

"Please!" Doc chided the aliens. "That was not necessary. They would have stopped."

He shouted to the girls: "Do the levade again," and they remounted and went into a circle. But in spite of Doc's assurance, the aliens involuntarily checked the onrush at the last second; not so strongly as before, but enough to make the girls clutch at the horses' manes.

Doc took a sly peek at the aliens. He hoped they were tiring and using up their reserves of strength. It was difficult to tell from their passive faces. Yet they snatched eagerly at the candyfloss when Kino returned. Doc thought it signified.

The horses gave way to Primo Zecca. Primo had his right arm in a sling, but he could throw knives

and shoot with either hand. He hadn't brought his knives, only a rifle—the one that Gage had doctored at the shooting stall.

Primo's act was conventional at first. A big dartboard target with lights popping up as he shot the numbers in quick succession. The extinction of the lights as he fired backwards over his shoulder with his assistant holding a mirror. Shattering an apple on his assistant's head, shooting a cigarette out of his mouth.

Then he turned to face the aliens, nodded to Doc and took the reloaded rifle from his helper. Doc held a five of spades high over his head. Primo tucked the butt of the rifle under his ear and loosed off five shots in rapid fire. The card was perforated with beautiful symmetry. Doc passed the card among the aliens for their inspection. When he was sure they had no doubt about the accuracy of Primo's shooting he signalled the marksman and sat back with a faint smile.

Little Mario ran into the ring and took over as Primo's helper. He reloaded the rifle and gave the barrel a half-twist as Gage had shown him. Then he crossed the sawdust and mounted the ring block beneath the senior on the extreme left. Even on the block, he barely topped the aliens' knees.

Primo raised the gun slowly and took very careful aim. Gage's doctoring was as precise as Primo's

shooting, and if he said six inches elevation at thirty feet, he meant exactly six inches. Primo lined the sights between the senior's eyes and pulled the trigger. The startled alien threw up a telekinetic barrier and the slug fell on Mario's shoulder.

The dwarf rounded on the Stoneman belligerently. "What do you think I'm here for?" he snarled.

Doc took over. He stood up to give Primo a better target. The trick marksman took his time in aiming. As Doc had instructed, he was giving the aliens ample opportunity to see that the next shot ought to put a hole in Doc's forehead. When he fired, the bullet went six inches high and flicked the tips of Doc's unruly hair.

Mario said to nobody in particular: "See?"

"Quite good for a child," Doc remarked casually to the alien ambassador. "Will you permit the same tests on each of you? You have my word you will not be shot. The artiste with the gun and the child here would both feel slighted if you did not agree."

He guessed their approval was given only because they were a lot surer of their own telekinetic abilities than they were of Mario's. And sure enough, every shot was baulked before it got within a foot of an alien. Doc wondered how much more mental energy

they had to spare. Kino brought a further supply of candyfloss while the cat cage was being erected.

Loder's act went well until Shad the Third escaped. The young lion was out of the improperly closed cage like a shot, snarling viciously, and began tearing across the ring towards the only occupied benches. Mario jumped into the ring and put up his hand like a traffic cop. But it was Loder's patient training and his high-pitched whistle that really stopped Shad. The cat dropped dead in his tracks. When he started to roll over and over until he reached the cage, it looked as if Mario was propelling him with his eyes.

Doc had shuffled the normal programme so that the less spectacular acts came next. The move gave the circus a spell to catch its breath for the finale and helped to pass the time—and time was getting short for the aliens. It was almost their bedtime.

Rioja came on after the breathing spell. His was the second last act. He caressed his skin with the torches, swallowed the flames, relit the torches with his breath. Under cover of swilling his mouth with cooling water, he filled his cheeks with Doc's special brew. He walked across the ring blowing jets of flame. The jets became increasingly longer. Facing the aliens, he blew a twelve-foot jet that must have made them worry,

it was that close. Doc knew it wouldn't have reached them. The problem was, did the aliens know—was that why they hadn't propelled themselves out of danger?

"A supreme artiste," Doc boasted. "Watch his last trick closely."

Rioja tipped a bottle on a torch to show that it contained fuel. From the ringside it was impossible to see that he emptied the inner compartment and that when he poured fluid over his head it came from the outer compartment of the double-walled bottle.

The drums went into a long roll. Rioja capered with the torch, whirling it nearer and nearer his head until it seemed the tension and drumming would never end.

Abruptly, the drums stopped and the silence was choking. Rioja held the torch aloft. He drew it down with agonising slowness. What really happened next was that Rioja spat a mouthful of fuel at the torch when it was inches from his face, and in the space of the soft explosion ducked his head down the neck of his coat through the harness Mrs. Mario had made.

What appeared to happen was the sudden disintegration of Rioja's head. As the decapitated Fire Eater ran off, Doc explained nonchalantly: "One of our best. Of course, he is immortal."

Rioja was barely out of the ring when Tina, Toni and Seppi came bounding in, flourished their capes, handed them to Big John and swarmed up their ropes.

Mario chose that instant to look afraid. "Danger!" he said. "This is the moment of danger!" Doc made his face solemn to show he believed Mario's prediction. He turned to the ambassador.

He said: "The danger is for the fliers, not for you. Please keep absolutely quiet. There must be nothing to distract them." He let his voice drop to a confidential whisper. "These three do not have the power. But the child and the others will help if there should be an accident, if they should fall. In the event of our combined powers not being sufficiently strong, perhaps you would——" He left it at that.

The ambassador nodded and Doc thought to himself: they must be in a right daze by this time wondering if terrestrials had telekinetic abilities, and if so how strong were they.

Tina and Toni did single, double and half-twist somersaults to Seppi on the other bar. Toni did a double-and-twist and on the back swing did an interchange with Tina. The girl swung back from Seppi's grasp to her own bar and then to the platform.

The lights dimmed and only Toni could be seen in the spotlight. He powdered his hands with

deliberation, covering Tina's climb down the rope. The drums gave him a build up, then stopped.

His first solo was deceptively simple—a full-length somersault with no limb bent and Seppi caught him by the ankles. He powdered his hands again. On the first swing of the bar, he did a spin which turned his back on Seppi.

Doc deliberately gripped an arm on either side of him. He wanted all the anxiety he could stir up. He didn't miss the interchange of glances.

Toni built up his swing. The trapeze was flying horizontally when he let go. He was a tight ball, arcing towards Seppi in one direction and spinning in the opposite direction, against the line of flight. Once, twice, three times he turned. He was halfway towards a fourth somersault when he straightened and reached for Seppi's wrists. He missed them by a foot.

Doc jumped to his feet and shouted: "Mario—quick!"

There was a lancing of light as the spot cut through the darkness. In the moving beam, Toni could be seen to halt in his fall and glide to a platform halfway up the trapeze pole. The spot went out and the band struck up a jerky march. When full lighting was restored, Tina and Toni were taking their bow in the ring and the black nylon trapeze on which

Tina had swung was out of sight. Understandably, it was a feat they reserved for the most special occasions.

The fug in Mario's wagon was a few degrees thicker than usual, probably because Big John had joined the company. Big John smoked a pipe sometimes, and it was a firm belief in the circus that the owner filled his pipe from the floors of the menagerie cages.

Everybody was making a great pretence of devoting his entire attention to the desultory poker game, but of course they were really waiting for Doc to tell them how they had got back to Mother Earth. And Doc, much as he appeared to be speculating what his hand was worth, was wondering how he could put it into simple words they would understand.

It was Big John whose patience cracked first. He threw in his cards and said: "Most of it I get. They were tired and you made them more tired by forcing them to use their telly business. Also you fooled them into thinking most of us could do anything they could do——"

Doc nodded. "That's about it," he agreed. "That's about all there was to it."

"But the payoff—what about the payoff?"

Doc shifted his weight to the other hip. He asked: "Remember the time we were over-run with rats? We tried spring traps, cage

traps, phosphorus poisons and red squill poisons. Everything we tried caught a few rats but the rest got educated and learned how to take the bait without springing the traps and they also learned to avoid tempting meals which smelled of phosphorus or red squill. Remember how we finally cleared them out?"

Big John sighed. He might have known Doc would take a round-about route to get to the point. He played along. "Some fancy chemical," he said. "Had a name with more letters than Rioja's full name, almost—and that's something."

"Alphanaphthylthiourea," the word tripped easily off Doc's tongue. "It has a foul bitter taste, which doesn't matter because bitterness doesn't register on a rat's palate. The important thing was its lack of smell. But more important still was the fact that we could put baits all over the tober without having to worry about any of the animals taking them. And why?—because although the chemical is poisonous to all animals, a lethal dose is also an emetic dose and it is sicked up. Except in the case of rats. We got rid of the rats by taking advantage of one fact peculiar to rodents—they can't vomit."

Big John smiled. Doc was well away now. He wouldn't need any more prompting.

Yet he still had to do it by digression. "All along the line," he said, "I was guessing. Our tactics were based on guesswork. We didn't know the guesses were right until the tactics paid off. Q.E.D.—as the man said. Proof by demonstration."

He accepted a cigarette from Mario. He went on: "The aliens' peculiarity was hunger. They didn't eat at comparatively regular intervals like we do. They ate whenever they had sapped their reserves by using their talent of telekinesis. They had the ability to expend an enormous amount of energy in a fraction of a second—and they had to stoke up again when they did so."

He cast a cautious eye at Mrs. Mario. "Putting it as delicately as possible," he said, "their peculiarity may not have been as peculiar as it would seem at first inspection. For don't they say that love makes an old man sleepy and a young man hungry?"

Mrs. Mario showed no sign of having heard and he continued: "As Big John noticed, I did everything I could to make them use their telekinetic powers. That depleted what energy they had left at the end of their day. The next step was to make sure they didn't replenish their energy with food. So I fed them with——"

Kino interrupted; "I fed them."

"——With candyfloss," Doc said. "Candyfloss made with

methylcellulose, which is the chemical name for the branded product I use when the animals are constipated. Methylcellulose has a tremendous capacity for absorbing water. In the stomach it swells and swells, eventually inducing peristalsis. But its first effect is to give a sensation of fullness. It kills the appetite by kidding the stomach it is full of food. Need I elaborate?"

Big John said no, and that was good enough for the rest of them. They were a long way behind in any case.

Doc proceeded to tie up the loose ends. "The only one who got unadulterated candyfloss was the one we first met. Between acts I got in a question about something that had me worried. I wondered why so few of the aliens turned up. I thought maybe the rest were being kept in reserve in case of any nonsense on our part. I thought they could be summoned telepathically. I was wrong. The answer was much simpler. Only the seniors came because I had made a great spiel about how special the occasion was. The Stonemen were strong on protocol."

Villem the gentle giant had been chewing a thumb pensively. He took it out to remark: "I don't know how you did it!" His tones were awed.

Doc blinked in surprise that Villem had been able to follow.

He carried on: "At the end of the trapeze act, I thought it was time to put the bite on. I told the ambassador he had seen a fair sample of *our* powers and that I was sure we could match them against his any day. I believe I apologised about it—they had that effect on me. He was still dazed after the performances and wasn't sure how strong my hand was. I told him that Mario alone could outwill all ten seniors and stop them leaving telekinetically."

He smiled as he remembered the alien's disbelief. The Stoneman had spoken to his seniors and they had looked at Mario speculatively.

"Go ahead and try, I offered. The child will stop you." Doc pretended he couldn't see Mario's scowl. The dwarf hadn't been too happy about the *child* business.

"They tried," Doc said. "And they couldn't move. They were dead beat. But naturally Mario got the credit. I had a bad moment when I wondered if the ambassador would be able to teleport the seniors by himself. He probably would have managed if it had been morning and was refreshed.

He nodded reflectively. "That was the moment of victory. I made a deal with our Stoneman. Either he returned to his city and got the rest of the population to pool their powers and send us back to Earth—why should we do the work when it was their fault in the first place—or else we would despatch the seniors

and every alien on the planet to a place without as much as a blade of grass. The rest you know. They were only too glad to get rid of us."

Big John raked inside his pipe with a spent match. "You took a helluva chance," he said. "It could have been them that dumped us in an ashcan."

Doc shook his head. "Funnily enough that didn't worry me. In a way, they weren't a bad lot, they just went the wrong way about things. But they had this strict adherence to doing what they thought was honourable. That's what I was banking on"

He stood up and thumbed the small of his back. He said: "Pack it up, you lot. I want to get to bed. I'm bushed. I've been working like a horse for days——"

Big John made a noise of derision. "You've been working like a horse! That's a laugh. Everybody else did the work. You didn't lift a finger. About the only muscle you used was your tongue!"

Villem thought Big John was being extremely ungrateful. He said: "Ain't nobody else could've done it except you, Doc."

Doc peered over non-existent spectacles and gave Big John an old-fashioned look. But his halo was shattered with Villem's next words.

"No," the giant insisted. "Ain't nobody but Doc could've said that word. Alfa-something-something-something. Say it again, Doc"

VALE!

By H. PHILIP STRATFORD

Few men can choose the manner of their passing; and fewer still can say 'Hail and Farewell' and mean it in a rather special way

THE CROWD AROUND THE ferry rocket was unusually quiet, and even the reporters and TV camera crews were subdued. This sort of occasion did not often happen and when it did it brought men's minds closer to the mystery of the stars and the vastly empty, toppling gulfs between.

Sunshine filled the spaceport. Warmth beat back pleasantly from wall and ground and the frisky breeze took any sting from the heat. The sky was a tall, translucent pearl and somewhere there were birds singing.

"Which," said Captain Myers, commenting to the gaunt, stooped man with the radiation scars, "is as it should be."

Ed Stefman did not reply at once. His mind had picked up the habit lately of dwelling on one item to the exclusion of all else so that any sudden remark out of

context jolted him. He had been looking at the ferry captain's jacket. Letting his eyes slide like fondling fingers over the rocket-in-wings insignia and the four crisp bars of braid on each shoulder. His old jacket, with the same insignia and marks of rank, hung now, moth-eaten, in a mouldering cupboard back home. It had been a long time.

"Birds?" he said at last, looking up palely into the sun glare. "Birds giving *Adastra* a send off, too, are they?"

The twittering rose and fell on the bright afternoon.

A speaker brayed. "All passengers please take their seats."

Captain Myers took his arm over the treads up the ferry's fin. It was in his mind to shake the helping hand off. Hell, he'd boarded the ship like a rocketman, hadn't he? The passengers; Press, space lines officials, government

office-holders, were riding up in the lift, being winched up into the swollen belly of the ship like cattle. He was a rocketman, wasn't he? Always had been, always would be—no—that wasn't right. His deep space days were over.

Had been, since the day *Adastra* spat in his face.

They were entering the lock now, into that unmistakable smell compounded of canned air, lubricating oil, sweat, fresh plastic paint and condensation that always seemed able to beat the conditioners.

It was good to be back inside a rocketship again.

Treading over the lock rim, Stefman had to remind himself that this was for the last time. It had been no easy decision, no snap judgment; it had taken nights of sleeplessness and days of uneasy mooning before he'd come to the sober realisation that it was the best way. And so now he trod forward into the ferry, taking him up to the station—and *Adastra*.

When he'd received the letter, heavy with official seals, telling him that the old *Adastra* was come to the end of her days, he had waited expectantly for the public appeal to follow. Follow, rapidly, it had. The public were sentimental in matters affecting ships. Always had been.

As her first captain, as the commander who had lifted her

out and taken her all the way to make history by setting mankind's foot upon the alien dust of Mars, he had cheerfully undertaken the position of chairman of the appeal committee.

"Save her!" had been the first call. Then they remembered the example of the first ship to touch down on the Moon, and the first to drop her boats down into the swathing eternal mists of Venus. Not save her. Give her the grandeur of a funeral; a gentle slipping into space to sail for ever among the stars in the wide emptiness that was her home. Like the first ship to the Moon and the first to Venus, *Adastra* would be pushed, gently, tenderly, reverently, to float on and out into the depths of space.

A good thought; not to destroy her, send her to a breaker's yard and tear out the historic materials and use them, possibly in new ships, more probably in fresh domestic utensils and office equipment; a good decision, to launch her outward bound with no returning.

"Welcome aboard, Captain Stefman," Captain Myers said formally. He smiled. "Although you won't be aboard long. *Adastra* is ready at the station. The launching ceremony will be brief." He moved aside to allow Stefman to mount laboriously to the control position. He said, softly,

for he was affected by the moment: "Brief, and poignant."

Days before Stefman would have laughed at him.

What did he owe *Adastra*? Radiation scars. A crippled body. A premature ageing. And more.

But now, now he knew that he, too, had found his destiny with the ship he had first driven out to Mars.

Inside the control cabin he allowed himself to be strapped down by brisk, young, efficient crewmen. They drugged him a little to soften the effects of gravities pulling at his sinewy frame, his hardening arteries, his labouring heart. When the ferry blasted off after the brusquely casual count-down, he was half dozing, lost in a world that had begun for him the day he'd graduated from Space Academy.

He'd ranged out to the Moon, working his way up the promotion ladder until, with a surprise that it had come so early and then a queerly disturbing realisation that he was older than he'd thought, he'd been given command of *Adastra*, with orders to crack the run to Mars. And so he had. First man to Mars. And *Adastra* the first ship to put her boats down on the alien surface.

Now, of course, the cocky youngsters pushed their ships out there round the clock, ships to make *Adastra* look very old.

So they'd decided to scrap her—and sentiment had taken over and demanded, and gained, for her a decent burial.

Gravity cut off and free fall took him in its embrace. He took his time disembarking. He'd never cared much for space stations, orbiting in free-fall around Earth—they'd put a couple around Mars, now, and the shuttles made the trips there as monotonously as they did to Earth—he'd always thought of them as poor substitutes for a deep-space man's dream.

Walking from the tube into the station's outer rim where spin gave almost one whole gravity, he headed directly for the polarised direct vision port. He forced his creaking spine back, lifting his head, to stare for a long time out into space.

She was there. *Adastra* was in position in her slot, all ready to blast off, just as she was when he'd bounced eagerly aboard to lift her out to Mars. Her grotesque shape, all bottles and globes and tanks lashed together by spider-thin taceries, with the sun bouncing splinter-sharp highlights off rounded surfaces, was not grotesque to him. Seeing her again, like that, reinforced his decision.

Once he'd loved her. Then he'd hated her; hated her with the deep, lusting, hurt and bewildered hatred of a wild animal that does

not understand the steel trap that will not let it go.

That lock there, in number three passenger globe.

That was the lock that Adele and Tim had spewed from, sprawling and screaming—briefly—when the lock valve relays failed. They'd been coughed out into space without spacesuits. Unarmoured, airless, unwarmed, they'd been tossed out like so much garbage. Because a relay failed.

Adastra hadn't wanted his wife and son aboard. He'd worked that out. Sure, it was quite plain. *Adastra* had been a perfect ship until the time Adele made her first voyage with young Tim. And *Adastra* had been jealous. She demanded complete allegiance from her men, and from her captain most of all. And his wife's name being Adele—that had been the last straw, it was very plain, now, after all these years.

So *Adastra* had killed them.

But he'd come to see the ship's point of view. He could see both sides of it, and when his new-made decision was at last consummated, he could talk reasonably about it to Adele.

"Ready to go aboard, captain?"

Stefman turned, his eyes veiled. When they cleared he saw the dapper young spaceman, very correct, slightly nervous at his assignment, which—Stefman guessed wryly—was to "wet-nurse that old gaffer Stefman." Well—it

wouldn't be for much longer, now.

"Sure, son. When you are." He quirked his lips. "Looking after the old 'un, are you?"

Surprise and something—compassion?—flared in the spaceman's face. "Oh, no, sir! On the contrary. *Adastra* is a pretty old ship to us. We need you to check over last details. Like always."

He knew that was a lie; but he let it ride.

"Righto, son. Lead on. But take it easy. I'm not as steady on my pins as——" He let that trail off.

The youngster flicked him a look from the corner of his eye. "If you don't mind my saying, sir, you're not as old as you think you are. A bit of this new psychotherapy, straighten the kinks out of your body—forgive me—but, that is——"

"Go on, lad. I'm listening. And I'm not mad."

"I didn't think you would be mad at me. You see, my father sailed with you. Carstairs. Only, he didn't come back."

"Carstairs' boy, eh! Well, that is nice. Good man, your father." His face mirrored old wounds. "We lost men. We knew we would. Your father went a little earlier than others, that's all."

"I know. We're over it—I hardly knew him."

Captain Myers bustled up, face pink, smoothing his uniform.

"Delegation's all set. Just need you to complete the picture, Captain Stefman."

"Right. I'll be along."

Stefman began to hunch along the walkway, heading for the airlock—number one airlock, naturally—where *Adastra* lay, waiting for him to come home.

A group of spacemen crossed in front, cutting down a side corridor. Lithe, easy-striding, familiar in the environment of man-made habitations plumbing the depths of space, they were past him almost as he saw them.

And the lighting played a trick. It must have, mustn't it?

That couldn't be Jack up there. Impossible. Jack was back on Earth somewhere, Amazon basin or Congo backwaters, probably. Trying to find the adventure and sense of direction that he craved, that he needed to stay alive and regard himself as a unit of civilisation. That he knew he could obtain only from space. And that he refused to allow space to give him. The feeling of purpose to life that he sought in danger and adventure on the surface of the Earth, when his whole body and mind called out for the frontiers of space.

Stefman knew. Jack was his son, wasn't he?

The son who had coldly and contemptuously told him to go

to hell—to keep on going to hell—when *Adastra* had killed Adele and Tim. Jack hadn't been able to take that.

He'd quit space academy, a few days before graduation, and gone roaring around the dens along the river and then signed up for a forlorn jungle jaunt, come out of that with yellow fever and a satchel full of money. Stefman hadn't seen him since. Newsreel pictures. Noted explorer—last of the big game hunters. Bunk.

The explorers, the big game hunters, lived in space.

So how could that have been Jack, striding in his spaceman's uniform, in company with other brawny spacemen, along that corridor up there? Eyes getting tired. Going back on him. Needed new contacts, probably.

But, of course, he was past needing anything new now, wasn't he, after he'd taken the decision?

They crossed the space station and made their way down towards the lock beyond which lay his ship.

The thing that surprised him more than anything else was the complete lack of feeling with which he was able to go aboard and walk around the familiar cabins and holds. He could slide down the communication tubes, from one globe to the next, see with undimmed eye the scratches and dents, the tattered paintwork, the warped frame-members, the

forlorn air of age and neglect. Oh, sure, they'd prettied her up a little; enough to ensure she could blast off out into the great unknown. More likely, Stefman considered cynically, so she'd look smart for the ceremony and the inquisitive, devouring eyes of the TV cameras. The world was looking in on this.

He tried to imagine himself as the cavalryman saying a choked goodbye to his horse, and then placing the pistol to its ear. The image clogged in his mind.

That had to be Jack. It had to be. His eyes might be cranky, and go back on him at times; but they had to have seen Jack, striding lithely in his spaceman's uniform.

"Everything okay, captain?"

He answered the fatuous enquiry, posed pompously and self-importantly by some government fellow or other, without allowing himself to be bitter about its implications. "Sure. Fine. Could hit Mars again, right on the button."

He could see that he was worrying them. They'd expected him to be sentimental, treacly, trying to keep the stiff upper lip of his class and furtively wiping a leathery cheek. Hell, tears on his face would waterfall off the radiation scars in a fine spray.

Adastra had been kept on the Mars run, even after he had left. But now she was finished. He

had breathed her first life into her; now he was to give her her quietus.

Crowd chatter stilled as he emerged from the lock and turned to face the cameras. He read his speech. Brief. To the point and, despite all, he felt choked up, a lump stoppering his throat and making him swallow time after time.

"Damn fool!" he told himself savagely. "The old ship became everything to me. When Adele left, why; what else was there for me to do? *Adastra's* a fine old lady and I'm sending something of myself out there into the darkness, with her. Damned sentimental old slob, that's me." He turned on his heel quickly, swallowing, and stomped over to the remote control board. Officials moved back respectfully.

He stood over the board, waiting whilst other speeches were made. Then they all expected him to press the button and launch her out. He smiled. If Jack was here, he'd guess what his father was going to do. But then—Jack was sweltering in a tropical jungle, or shivering on an Antarctic peak, wasn't he?

". . . Captain Stefman, who has carried the torch of man's exploration of space outwards from Earth, and the faithful ship, symbol of man's striving . . ." The speeches would soon be finished.

Funny how his eyes kept getting misted up. Damned old fool!

Goodbyes are always sad.

In that moment came the moment for the decision to be ratified, one way or the other. Carefully, Captain Ed Stefman stumped away from the remote control board, pushing through the crowd, murmuring apologies, aware of questioning eyes. "Thought of something," he said. "Check. Minute."

It didn't matter what he said. Anything. Just so he climbed wearily aboard without opposition. He clambered along the familiar runways and so into the control globe. He sat for a moment, hands limply on the board, staring out into space. Like a scattering of sequins twinkling on a velvet gown, like gems randomly strewn by a happy lapidary, the stars beckoned him.

Firmly, he depressed the key to seal ship.

Air locks sighed shut. He watched the board with its tell-tales, and he might have been young again, setting out for Mars and all of space to conquer. The old *Adastr*a shouldn't have to set out on her last great voyage alone. She needed the touch of a familiar hand.

He swallowed again and wiped his eyes. Decrepit old dotard! He wasn't really old, chronologically, with all the resources of

medical science at his disposal. He could go back to Earth and start again his researches—they needed him down there in the labs. Pushing out into space demanded the very best brains Earth could muster.

But *Adastr*a needed him more.

In the old routine, he thumbed the pumps into action, opened the tanks, set the fire eating away at the heart of matter. He wondered vaguely what they were thinking on the send-off committee. Gravity surged. He was off.

The decision had been made and ratified and now only the price to be paid remained.

He sat there, feeling weight pressing on him. Weight of the gentle acceleration, weight of years, weight of disappointment. He had made the step; failure meant nothing. If he failed, then he would have succeeded. And if he had succeeded, then all was to start again.

He reviewed his life, in that dark moment, and he saw the many places where he had done things he wished he had not. He might not be able to cancel half a line of what he had written in life; but there was always a new beginning.

And that beginning was opening out before him now as *Adastr*a plunged boldly towards the stars.

He would penetrate where no man had gone before, where no man would follow for many years.

He might be dead. His body might be a frozen corpse, waxen in the rigidity of space. But he would have been there.

"Guessed you'd do a damn fool thing like this, dad."

Jack's voice. Jack himself, leaning in the hatchway, smiling, lean face with Adele's mouth. Jack, his son whom he hadn't seen for years.

"You're supposed to be exploring the little corners of Earth, Jack."

Play it easily. Softly. Let the boy talk.

"Sure. And you were supposed to send this wreck shooting outward bound. Give it a good swift kick and then get back to Earth and some useful work."

New emotions hammered at him. "Wreck, *Adastra*? She's a wonderful ship—I can't explain—thought it was the best thing to do. Your mother . . ."

"Don't talk to me about mother. This damned contraption killed her, and Tim, too. You don't owe this kettle anything."

"Jack! I'm your father. I know what I'm doing."

He did, too.

"Sure you know! Just a last little blaze of publicity. I signed on for space service a few years back. Couldn't keep out. But you—you're just letting emotion get you down and you're quitting. Your injuries can be fixed up. You're

not an old man. We need you, back on Earth."

"Maybe, Jack. Maybe. But I'm an aged man and weary. End it all. Best way out."

"Nuts. Identifying yourself with this collection of rockets and tin cans is proof that you're halfway round the bend. You're coming back to Earth with me. I've a little life shell. We can be back on the station in an hour."

"And after, Jack? Will you be my son again? Will we—will we get along? Like we used to?"

Jack smiled, moving forward. He put a hand on his father's shoulder.

"You old dope. Of course we will. I've grown older, too. I can see other points of view. We'll get along."

"That's all I wanted to hear."

"Just as well I knew my father, eh, dad? I guessed you'd try some romantic stunt like this. Couldn't say goodbye to what you thought meant more to you than anything else in the world, in space."

"*Adastra* means a lot——"

"Come on. Earth means a lot more. There are things to do." Jack shepherded him down into the life shell. "You have to say goodbye to all kinds of things in life. Good things and bad things. But it's no use looking back over your shoulder and crying for what you've lost. And it's even more stupid and self-pitying to

throw your life away on something that's over." The life shell lifted away from the ship, curved back towards the space station.

"You're on your way back to life, Dad."

Ed Stefman smiled, a little wryly, in the life shell.

His decision, his gamble, had paid off. *Adastra* had repaid her debt. At last, he could go forward into life with his son by his side. It had been worth the agony, the soul-searching that had tortured him before he'd taken the gamble. Jack. He knew his son. He'd known his son could only do what his character dictated. It hadn't really been a gamble after all.

But he wouldn't tell Jack that, ever.

And if Jack hadn't done as his father had predicted, if he hadn't come back—well, he'd have been happy to have sat at *Adastra's* control board and pushed her out to the blaze of stars, remotely beckoning, waiting out there.

He and his ship, alone together in the wastes between the stars.

Captain Ed Stefman turned to look back. *Adastra* was a point of light, gleaming in sunlight, heading out, voyaging out past the barriers of the known, disappearing for ever from men's eyes and habitations; but she would never be forgotten.

"Farewell," he said softly. "Farewell."

THE END



PRIDE OF POSSESSION

By RON LOWAM

It is an axiom that a man who has nothing has nothing to lose. But men are assessed by their possessions. And possessions can dominate.

SAM MET HER AT A PARTY, ONE of those super-sophisticated affairs where everyone called perfect strangers by their christian names and to be affected was to be normal. She was almost as tall as himself, with corn-coloured hair curled about a face almost devoid of paint. Her eyes were blue, her lips the colour of new-spilt blood, her figure lissom and supple, smooth and inviting. She wasn't beautiful, not by the accepted standards of beauty, but she had what every other woman in the place longed for and couldn't get. She had life, vibrant, exciting, the natural attribute of a woman with an infinity capacity for loving and who knew what she wanted.

She wanted Sam.

At first he couldn't believe it. For him it had started as a game,

the stupid conventions of a conventional society, the polite, utterly insincere exchange of compliments as empty and as foolish as those who made them. Such was normal behaviour and no one believed in them for a moment. Shelia did believe and, believing, responded in a way both natural and unexpected so that, in an incredibly short space of time, Sam found himself caught in a surge of emotion such as he had never before experienced.

It almost frightened him, that emotion. It both repelled and attracted, hurt and satisfied, salved his ego and, at the same time, made him doubt his own good fortune. He was in love and he wasn't yet sure whether he liked it or not. Shelia was too wonderful, too sought after, his hold on her too fragile for him ever to be

wholly satisfied. And yet he was mature enough to know that any attempt to bind her more firmly, more possessively, would defeat its own purpose. Yet he wanted to possess her, not just physically, but mentally and spiritually as well. He wanted to be sure that she was, and always would be, his.

Incredibly she felt the same way.

"I love you," she said simply on the evening of their first meeting. "I want you, Sam, for ever and ever."

"I'm married." He hated to say it, but it had to be said. She was not surprised.

"I know, but does that matter? I love you, Sam. I love you."

And there it was.

Three words which, spoken by an attractive woman, render a man helpless. For, against such a declaration he has no defence. First there is pride at being chosen, then kindness for the one who has gone against convention so far as to be natural, then reciprocation and the desire, if not to love, then at least not to hurt. The oldest snare in the world and one which, while men are as they are, can never fail. And so . . .

"I love you, too, darling." He reached for her and suddenly she was in his arms. "I love you . . . I love you . . . I love you . . ." Over and over and with each

repetition he became more and more lost.

That was the beginning.

Sam was a self-made man, an importer of rare and beautiful objets d'art, a connoisseur in a field in which there were nothing but connoisseurs. He was an agent for the collectors, haggling with the prospectors from Mars with their fretted filligrees of time-worn stone; from Venus with their native carvings, their rare artifacts, their finger stones and primitive art; from the Asteroids with their impossibly scarce gems smoothed and fashioned by alien hands long vanished into dust. He weighed and valued, setting intrinsic value against the intangible but ever-present and incredibly reckless pride of possession which was the motivating power of his clients. It had taken him a long time to reach his position and inevitably he, too, suffered from the pride of possession.

But he was forty-three years old.

He was not old, not physically old, but mentally he had aged, and now he suffered from conflicting emotions which, at times, seemed to threaten his very sanity. He was an old man in love, and, because of that, he loved deeper and stronger than any callow youth.

Because he knew that this

could be the very last time.

There would never be another Shelia. There would never be another woman who would look up at him with her soul in her eyes and whisper soft and wonderful words of shameless love. This was his hour, impossible as it seemed, and now he had the final chance to recapture the surging emotion of his youth, to enjoy to the full the passion of abandonment, enjoy it all the more because he realised its value as no younger man ever could.

He wanted Shelia. He wanted her always and yet, oddly enough, a part of his mind seemed to stand back in cold isolation against his Indian Summer madness and to warn and sneer at his most tender thoughts. He hated himself for his doubting and yet, despite himself, he knew it for the truth.

"I love you," he said to Shelia and within him the isolated part of his mind offered cold correction. *"Not love, want. You want her because she is young and attractive, and because she is giving you what you need. Not physical love, but the surrender every man wants from a woman. Love her? Be your age, man, what can she see in you?"*

"I love you, too, Sam," she whispered and her hand, as it touched his cheek, was soft and as gentle as that of a mother soothing her first-born child. "I'm only

really happy when I'm with you." She pressed herself against him. "Sam! Tell me that we'll never be apart! Please, Sam!"

Of course, he promised. He held her close and swore that he would never let her go. He calmed her fears that he was amusing himself with her, convinced her that, to him, she meant more than the entire world, whispered fantastic promises and, all the time he was with her, he was sincere and really believed what he said.

But afterwards, away from her magic, common sense or sheer timidity made him rationalise and justify what he had done.

Because it wasn't as simple as she seemed to think.

He had a wife, a possession among other possessions, but she had done him no harm and he hesitated at hurting one undeserving of hurt. Was it her fault that she was so cold? Had she always been so? Twenty years had passed since they had married and time dulls even the sharpest memory. All he knew was that now she did not give him what he felt that he must have. The little lies, the flattery, the compliment to salve his ego, the whispered declaration of love, the playfully wanton caresses, the whole exciting world which should be the natural result of a union between man and woman.

Life with Mary was comfortable, but that's all it was. He forgot the last time they had kissed. He couldn't remember the last time she had lain in his arms and, when he tried to think about it, he found that he did not want to remember. And yet she had been a good wife. They had a son, now stationed at Tycho on the Moon, a promising young cadet for the Spacial Service. They had a nice home and, in a few more years, it would all be paid for. He had his collections, his hobbies, his few precious works of art. He had his consol record player and a complete file of the masters. They had money in the bank, not much, but enough to prevent worry. They had . . . they had . . .

But it was the wrong they.

It should be Shelia and he who had these things. Not he and a woman who was now more a housekeeper than a wife. Shelia, with the soft and loving lips, Shelia with the corn-coloured hair and the eyes of sapphire blue. Shelia who could give him youth and love and excitement, who could restore the impetuous urgings of his younger days, who wanted him and wasn't ashamed to say so. Who waited for him to come to her, patiently as yet, but how long would that patience last?

And he couldn't make up his mind.

He tried to tell her one afternoon when they were alone on a hill far in the country overlooking the distant smudge of the city which was the ant-hill in which they lived. The sun was warm and the air heavy with the scent of growing things, and a bee, fat and droning, made a muted echo to his words.

"I love you, darling. I love you so much."

"And I love you, Sam. I will always love you."

They kissed, it was inevitable.

"You are worried." She touched his thinning hair and, beneath her touch, he lost his hesitation and became bold through his ardour.

"Darling, would you do anything for me?"

"You know I would, dear."

"Anything?" Why he insisted he didn't know, but it is the nature of lovers to demand the impossible.

"Of course, Sam. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know what to do," he confessed. "Loving you the way I do, nothing seems to matter but being with you, but . . ."

She caught his hesitation. "But?"

"We have to live, and once I move I lose my contacts and my income."

"I can work," she reminded

gently. "As long as we are together it doesn't matter what I do."

"Do you think I want that? You to work to support me while I work to support my wife?" It was brutal, but that was the way he felt. "I can't desert her, Shelia. She's done me no harm, and I just can't walk out and leave her to face life unaided. It wouldn't be fair." He forced her to look at him. "You wouldn't want me to do that, would you?"

She didn't answer. It shocked him a little, because he had been so sure, and, as he looked at her, he felt cold and suddenly very old.

She wanted him to leave everything he owned and possessed and run away with her. He knew it by her silence, and knowing it, he couldn't find it within him to blame her. Life is a struggle in which sacrifices must be made, and now it was up to him to make a sacrifice in his turn.

"I've booked passage on the Mars rocket," she said quietly. "I've waited long enough, Sam, and now it's up to you. I love you, you know that, but I want our love to be open and clean. I don't feel that I am doing wrong; after all, if your wife means so much to you, then you would never have done what you have." She twisted and her lips were hard against his own. "I love you, Sam. Remember that. I love you

and I want you, but I cannot go on as you seem to want. So I'm catching the midnight rocket to Mars. If you want me, come with me. If you don't catch the rocket, then I'll know that all this has just been nothing to you, that you haven't meant a word you said. I leave it to you, Sam. Midnight, I shall be waiting."

She was gone, then, striding down the hill with a beauty of movement which made his eyes burn with a sudden tenderness. He couldn't lose her. He couldn't!

And yet, back in his apartment, he began to feel the old familiar doubts.

There was that carving from Venus, a rare object and quite valuable; could he bear to lose it for good? His consol and records, irreplaceable some of them; must he lose those, too? His home, comfortable, furnished at great expense over the years; could he leave it for a third-rate hotel room on a strange planet?

Indecision clawed at him. On one hand Shelia and all that she stood for. On the other all he had worked for all his life, his possessions, his beautiful, irreplaceable possessions. Could any woman be worth such a sacrifice?

And, supposing she was playing with him? Supposing that she grew tired of him and walked out, leaving him with nothing at all. His home gone, his possessions gone, the woman he loved gone.

He had a chilling glimpse of himself, old, broken, stranded on Mars without hope, without money, with nothing but bitter memories to accompany him to his grave.

Deep inside his mind the warning voice whispered swift justification.

"Don't be a fool, man. What's any woman worth when you come down to it? A moment of ecstasy and a lifetime of regret. Hang onto what you've got. Hang tight onto the things which matter. Your home, your money. With money you can buy anything. Don't be a fool!"

"No!" He shook his head against the whispering voice of the part of him which had never known emotional surrender. Impatiently, he moved across the soft carpet, touching this, looking at that, knowing that time was running out, and if he were going there were things he should do. Money, he would need money and should be getting it. Still, no hurry there; the spaceport bank remained open twenty-four hours a day. Letters then, a letter to his son, another to his wife, but what good would letters do to a family deserted after so long by the man they had come to trust? Packing, he would need clothes and a few mementoes, but weight was restricted on the rocket ships and there would be no room for items of sentimental value. He could buy clothes when he reached Mars.

The chiming of the clock made him aware of the time. Eleven! One hour to go! Softly, he stepped towards Mary's bedroom, hesitating with his hand on the knob. He had arrived back late, tired and worried after walking and trying to make up his mind. She had retired before he returned and he had been glad of it. Should he wake her? Would she perhaps quarrel with him and make the parting easier? He didn't know, but, as he thought about it, his hand fell away from the door. He didn't want to see her, not with Shelia's memory so vivid in mind.

The clock chimed again, eleven thirty. A half an hour to make it to the spaceport, and Shelia, and a lifetime of bliss . . . or a lifetime of regret. Which? What to do? Indecision tormented him and he strode almost blindly about the apartment while, deep within him, that mocking voice rationalised and justified his delay.

"You don't really want to go. Trust your subconscious. If you wanted to go you wouldn't be here now, you wouldn't delay, you'd be on your way to the spaceport." And again. *"Forget it. Forget her. Forget the whole thing. It was an episode, nothing more, and you're lucky it ended as it did. She could have made trouble, lots of trouble, and, anyway, how can you trust her? She did it with you, she could do it with others."*

The clock chimed eleven forty-

five. If he was going he had to go now. Now! At once! Later would be too late. But he still couldn't make up his mind.

A thousand things held him. The rugs on the floor, the vase on the shelf, the new paintwork, the lustre of a carved piece of stone, the thousand strings which held him to the life he had built for himself, the inertia of a man who has and fears at losing what he thought he prized.

He was still trying to make up his mind when the flaming take-off trail of the Martian rocket slashed a swathe of light across the sky, and he knew that his time for choice was over.

Shelia had gone.

She had gone for good, and he knew that he would never see her again. She had waited, confident in the knowledge that he would come, and instead he had proved himself to be the worst sort of liar there was. A man who lied and took, and gave nothing, not even his word. He had hurt her and she had not deserved that hurt. He had taken something fine and good and cheapened it through his own cowardice and, watching the dying light in the sky, he knew that he would regret it for life.

He turned and saw his possessions, the precious things which had held him so close and, as he stared at them, they took on a new and horrible meaning. Not possessions at all. He didn't own

them—they owned him. The console, he had worked for two years to buy that with its records. Two years of his life wasted for a thing of wood and wire, plastic and metal. The carving, cold stone and yet it had taken the full-time effort of five years before he could call it his. His home, he was still paying for it after twenty years. The rugs, more time, more effort. Everywhere he looked he could see the things which, in the essence, represented his life and his youth.

And he had chosen them instead of Shelia.

He had chosen things of wood and stone, wire and wool, plastic and metal instead of the warm, comforting, infinitely desirable love of a woman. He had chosen the things any man with money could buy and thrown away the one thing every man wanted. He had been a fool.

Mary, woken by the sound of unnatural noise, peered from her bedroom and her eyes widened at the sight of Sam sitting slumped in one of the chairs she was so proud of. She stared at him for a long moment before going back to bed. The sight had disturbed her more than she cared to admit, but, as she settled down for sleep, she comforted herself with the knowledge that everything would be all right in the morning. Still, it had been odd. She had never seen a man cry before.

THE LIGHTS OF ANKER-MO

By JON J. DEEGAN

The crew of Old Growler had run into some peculiar situations in their time but none quite like the one on Planet AM33/2

WHAT WOULD YOU CONSIDER an adequate reward for anyone who gave mankind the Elixir of Life? Think about it carefully, now, and what it would mean. Immortality—never to grow old or die; to live on and on for ever in eternal youth.

Think of it—the Elixir of Life! And there I stood in the huge cavernous hall, amid the peculiar black and purple shadows of an alien planet, staring down at a one-inch cube of the stuff resting in my gloved hand! Me—a humble botanist from an Inter-X working squad!

"This we give you," boomed Kabbah, Emperor of Anker-Mo, "in token of friendship. For these days when, as you tell us, your great ship has soared across voids between the stars to this world of ours, shall rightly be marked as famous. The clouds which eternally encompass Anker-Mo have shut off for me and my people

all sight of the wonderful, glittering universe you describe. Until now we did not know other worlds or planets existed or were inhabited. Nor, if we did, would we have cared greatly to make the first approach, since we are a shy people who value our privacy and do not care to be overlooked by anyone. Nevertheless, if matters have been thus ordained, we welcome you among us and must remain content."

He squatted there comfortably in his bowl-shaped throne, gesturing now and again with a front tentacle to emphasise his oratory. I looked down again at the small cube in my palm and let the sonorous ceremonial sentences flow over me half-heard and half-translated.

I wasn't alone in possessing a cube of the Elixir. Simpson, leader of the other Inter-X team, also held one. He stared at it in a goggle-eyed, hypnotised sort of

way, breathing heavily. Unashamedly, I did the same.

And could you blame us? Those innocent, harmless-looking morsels of compressed powder apparently held a secret that scientists had been striving to discover since civilization began.

I gazed at the little cube and caught my breath anew. Was it really possible for man to live for ever? Never to know the wrinkled features, failing powers or dimming eyes of age? In that moment I believed it to be true, and we had stumbled upon the discovery by sheer accident when two of *Old Growler's* scout vessels descended through opaque layers of thick, green cloud to see precisely what lay upon the surface of a planet listed officially as No. AM33/2.

There can't be many people these days who remain unaware of the Interplanetary Exploration Bureau's method of working. In a nutshell, one of the big depot ships, such as our own, No. 2213—called *Old Growler* because of a peculiar, unexplained noise from her gravity retractors—trundles across space to a star's planetary system previously picked out by the Astronomical Department and turns upon each world at closer quarters the electronic scanners, polaroid visual magnifiers, infra-red and ultra-violet screens, spectroscopic analysers and the rest of the Observation Section's paraphernalia. Then, when the ship's Scientific Panel have a pretty good idea what might be found, the landing squads are despatched in

scout vessels to collect specimens of vegetation, rocks and so forth and to take photographs.

Only in the case of Planet AM33/2 they'd struck a snag. Visual aids reflected merely the slow-moving surface of atmospheric cloud; operators of various radar instruments found to their disgust that ionisation of some strange kind threw back electronic beams in their faces, so to speak, without allowing penetration to the world's surface.

Grubersohn, the fat, pompous head of our Observation Section, stamped up and down, growing purple of countenance and taking the affair as a personal insult. He couldn't do anything about it, though, so the first team went in "blind."

Our own scout vessel hovered a hundred miles up while we listened to Simpson's technical report going over to the duty-controller aboard *Old Growler*. Most of it proved wholly negative, consisting of "nil reaction" for almost every instrument.

"Going in," said Simpson, at last.

"Maintain continuous radio contact," ordered the controller unemotionally. "Exercise utmost precautions when landing."

"As though," said Tubby Goss, the round-faced photographer who, with Hartnell and myself, makes up our own particular squad, "they'd do anything else!" He added a rather impolite noise of disgust and I switched off the transmitter hurriedly.

Controllers are cold-blooded

men of icy personality, with a steel-hard outlook on life sufficient to blunt an old-time battle-axe. They are very particular about proper discipline being observed on the radio channels, but with luck they'd mistake this piece of disrespect for stray static. Our names were already mud with the Disciplinary Committee, and there was no sense in making matters worse.

I stared into the visi-screen over Hartnell's shoulder while he sat at the controls.

"Going in," said Simpson again. "Eight hundred and ten miles an hour. Exploratory run——"

I started to sweat, and my stomach tied itself into a cold, hard knot. I could imagine Simpson's thick, hairy fingers on the control buttons, and the two others of his team grimly watching meter-needles. The "Three S's" we called them—Simpson, Schweigmann and Sinclair. We'd been friendly with them for a long time—a comradeship that ran strong and true beneath the rather hard-boiled banter that passes for conversation among Inter-X men. Now these three—with whom we'd talked, eaten and enjoyed ourselves so often—were going to send their little ship screaming into that evil-looking green cloud-bank without knowing whether cruelly spiked mountain tops lurked immediately beneath, ready to rip their fragile vessel to pieces, or if the vaporous, blinding envelope descended right down to bare, stony plains upon which they might crash sickeningly.

Like a tiny silver fish flashing through a dark sea the ship dipped out of sight. "Inside cloud," announced Simpson. "Rate of descent decreasing——"

Then silence. A dreadful, drawn-out silence that set icy fingers of anxiety stroking my spine.

"Calling Scout Ship 46J," said the controller. That was us. "Can you receive Ship 46G?"

I flipped the switch again. "No contact," I reported.

I gripped young Hartnell's arm until my knuckles showed white, but he didn't move. His lean, brown profile might have been carved from granite. All our eyes stared at the screen. What had happened?

"——Fully eight miles above surface," said Simpson's voice, suddenly. "Range of rocky hills lying to the east. Wide plain immediately below point of penetration. Landing should provide no difficulty."

And with his words the ship swept into sight again, clear sunlight reflected brightly from coromium plating.

Hartnell relaxed with a sigh. "Of course! Those green clouds are ionised or something. They couldn't get through with radar scanners, could they? In the same way Simpson's radio signals wouldn't get out."

The controller didn't bother about the technical details. "Calling Scout Ship 46G," he said, formally. "Landing permission granted. Continue to exercise utmost caution."

I caught Tubby's grimace, but neither of us said anything. We saw in the screen how Simpson's ship swung herself boldly above the swirling, emerald vapours. She poised, nose upwards, while rear jets sparkled pinkly, then dropped tail-first like a plummet out of sight.

Young Hartnell waved a hand encouragingly, as though Simpson could see it. "Good luck!"

"Calling Scout Ship 46J," said the controller, frigidly. "Maintain radio silence."

I groaned. I'd forgotten the transmitter switch. More meat for the Disciplinary Committee. Yet did they think freezing fluid instead of blood ran in our veins as well as theirs?

Silence, radio and otherwise, continued for a long time. What could we do? What could we say?

Hartnell, fuming, first checked that the transmitter switch was off. "Do we have to wait up here till Doomsday? Simpson and his lot may take twenty-four hours or more before they pop back through that cloud."

"Very nice, too," said Tubby, wistfully. "At least, they're out of reach of controllers. Wish we were——"

"Call 'em up, Pop," suggested Hartnell. "Request instructions or something. Let 'em know we're still here."

I didn't doubt that *Old Growler's* screens continued to show us up clearly. "You heard him tell us to keep quiet——"

"Calling Scout Ship 46J. Land

on co-ordinates M467-387. Contact personnel of Ship 46G. Arrange for one party to communicate with parent vessel in not less than twelve hours."

"There you are!" yelled Tubby. "Now maybe we'll get a bit of peace——"

Peace? He didn't know what we were in for.

I flapped a warning hand in his direction and switched on the transmitter. "Message received and understood," I intoned gravely.

Hartnell started pressing control buttons and the two of us dived for the acceleration chairs. We'd both known young Hartnell at the controls of a scout ship before.

He tipped the craft neatly on end and sent us shooting downwards.

The amplifier honked once more before that mysterious green blanket shut off all radio sounds. "Good luck," it said, rather surprisingly.

I was so taken aback by this remarkable, and unexpected, demonstration of human feeling that I didn't notice with any degree of accuracy the thickness of the green cloud, although the information was certain to be marked up inside the sealed automatic recorders. By the time I'd recovered we were slowing rapidly under a peculiar emerald sky. The colouring made our landing jets assume a most unusual hue. In addition, the queer light had the effect of preventing us from seeing at first glance whether rock or vegetation lay immediately beneath us—certainly no outline

of trees showed against the skyline of foothills some few miles away.

Scout Ship 46J came to rest with a slight jarring sensation. Scout Ship 46G was already there, shining greenly in the distance.

Young Hartnell bounded from the pilot's seat and snapped the transmitter over to inter-com frequency. He was grinning with wicked delight all over his face. "Hello, Simpson, you beetle-browed old so-and-so! Whereabouts are you?"

I jumped violently. I could have kicked myself for not thinking of it before. Although the clouds cut off radio traffic with ships above, there would obviously be nothing to prevent ground-to-ground messages.

There wasn't. The reply came in the same polite tone as the original call. "Is that a couple of yards of cold tap water named Hartnell?" The controller would have broken a blood vessel if he could have heard them.

Sinclair came on. "Welcome to Anker-Mo."

"Where?" I said. "I thought this was Planet AM33/2."

"Maybe to the controllers, Pop—not to the inhabitants!"

"Inhabitants?" I stared into the visi-screen. Nothing moved under that horrible sky. "What kind? Big green beetles?"

"Sort of brownish. Legs and tentacles, with large yellow eyes."

Tubby let out a howl. "No! My colour filters won't stand it! How can anybody be expected to take photographs with——"

"Hello," said Schweigmann, breaking in genially. "I hear the voice of the Barrel Boy in person! No wonder your ship made such a stinking landing with all that weight on board!"

"What d'you mean—'Barrel Boy'?" demanded Tubby furiously. "You're a lot fatter than I am!"

"I'm an older man than you are," said Schweigmann with dignity.

"What was that about a stinking landing?" asked Hartnell dangerously.

The whole thing was getting out of hand. This was supposed to be serious exploration. The trouble was that wherever Hartnell, Tubby and their ilk congregated they refused to be intimidated by surroundings, however, bizarre. They trotted around the galaxy thumbing their noses at strange perils in a hundred different forms—which was all very well in its way, yet sometimes business ought to take precedence over the exchange of flippancies. I said as much, only to be told I was getting stuffy in my old age.

"I'll take an apology later," I said.

They laughed.

"So will I," added Hartnell. "Now, whereabouts are you? Explain clearly, so that we can tell you from your tentacled friends!"

I heard Simpson choke very satisfactorily on this insult.

"They really are friendly, I hope," said Tubby.

"Pretty little pets," said Sinclair. "Erikksen vocabulary No. 9(e). I had a brief chat with the crowd

that came to meet us. Not hostile—but on the other hand not over-enthusiastic. Non-committal, as it were—”

The Eriksen books, of course, form one of the means of communication with extra-terrestrial creatures. Each vocabulary comprises, so to speak, the concentrated essence of several related spoken languages, and it's moderately easy to follow the drift of a conversation after a little practice.

“Oh,” I said sympathetically. “Have you been elected? I expect our lot'll shove the job on me, as usual—”

“If Pop and Sinclair stop weeping on each other's shoulders for a minute,” said Simpson, “I can get a word in edgeways to tell you they're taking us along a sort of pass through the lower hills to what they say are their headquarters. About eight in the escort. They don't seem to be carrying weapons. If you intend following, bring your atmosphere suits. Oxygen's here all right, but a bit too thin for comfort—”

I heard Schweigmann suddenly break into the conversation circuit. “Look—buildings!”

Simpson gave a low, astonished whistle. “That's right. Sort of half in, half out of the rock. We can see an approachway, with guards—”

Gaps in the story could be filled from our own similar experiences in landing on a dozen or more weird worlds. It's not always easy to descend upon another globe and meet the inhabitants. Oh, I know all that

stuff in the Inter-X Manual about emphasising peaceful intentions. It's quite true, of course, that we arrive willing and eager to be friends; the trouble is that the populace doesn't always wait to see. From their point of view such an attitude's understandable. Natural reaction is to shoot first and talk afterwards. I'm afraid it happens in a regrettable number of cases. That's why I felt uneasy when Sinclair spoke about AM33/2 being inhabited. Hartnell and Tubby always seem quite carefree about this sort of thing. Me, I've never pretended to be brave.

Anyway, it didn't seem like our show this time. Simpson was there already and most of the normal curiosity, hostility and revulsion inseparable from encounters between completely different life-forms appeared to have been overcome.

“Don't hurry too much,” said Hartnell, reaching for his suit. “We might miss you.”

Simpson guffawed. “You won't miss us. The lads of Anker-Mo saw your stinking landing, too! They've sent another reception committee to bring you in!”

Thus it was that we made our own encounter with eight of the inhabitants, who appeared along a rocky defile, crossed the level ground towards us and grouped themselves near the ship, waiting patiently.

Before I joined Inter-X a particularly heavy supper would occasionally bring on nightmares in which outlandish creatures

chased me, sweating and trembling, through the mists of sleep. Since then I've seen most of them—and worse—in the flesh. These people of Anker-Mo weren't actually among the creepiest varieties of life we'd encountered, yet they certainly couldn't be rated as attractive. Seven or eight tentacles spread from a body roughly globular in shape, upon which the only visible features were two big, round, pale yellow eyes that never blinked or altered expression. The things normally rested on the tentacles at a height of about four feet, but when moving raised themselves on "tiptoe" (as young Hartnell put it) and shifted quite rapidly with tiny, incredibly quick steps.

Sinclair described the creatures as "sort of brownish." It proved difficult to be more precise, since we saw them under very strange lighting conditions—first the dull green of Anker-Mo's unholy sky, later the equally unpleasant purplish hue of the glowing rock which comprised their buildings.

I addressed a small propaganda speech to the group with the aid of Erikksen books. As expected, Hartnell and Tubby fobbed me off with the job of handling the vocabulary because "I always did it so well." This empty flattery deceived no one—especially me—but they just stood there, wearing bland smiles on their innocent, butter-smooth faces and making no move, so somebody had to fill the breach.

I'd never tried this particular vocabulary before, and thought I

did rather well, but our visitors received the sentiments non-committally, staring with un-blinking eyes until I'd finished. Then one of them—obviously the leader—waved a tentacle rather brusquely. "Follow us," he said.

In this way we came to the strangest city of all time, although the most eerie aspects didn't show themselves until later.

The place had been constructed on a hillside—half underground and half built into the solid rock—from some hard peculiar material which glowed with luminous purple along every corridor and through every great cavern that the creatures led us. Even the "Three S's" didn't have a great deal to say for themselves. Like us, they must have wondered where we were being taken.

During the bizarre procession through widening tunnels I heard Tubby groan. Among muttered curses I caught something about filfers.

"What's the matter, Grumble-guts?" called Simpson, elegantly, from the head of the parade. "Light too bad to take your pretty pictures?"

"I ask you!" said Tubby in disgust. "Dim, bilious green outside—now they bring us here, where it's dark as the inside of a grape!"

Personally, I'd have said it was rather lighter, but not much—a queer, creepy glow of reddish-mauve shot through with deep violet. I think we were all conscious, to greater or lesser degree, of a strange depression brought

on by those melancholy colourings. We plodded on mechanically, speaking little.

Even our entrance into the great hall—a huge, empty place of black and purple shadows—failed to bring exclamations of awe. Despite the size and decoration of this stupendous, vaulted cavern, our attention became focused upon a dwarfed handful of creatures grouped round a bowl-shaped affair on a pedestal. Within this peculiar throne rested one of their number who obviously enjoyed some special status, and while we were ushered towards him, his round, yellow eyes stared at us unblinkingly over the rim.

"I don't like this," muttered Schweigmann. He looked around the vast gloomy place uneasily. It would have held thousands—maybe tens of thousands—yet the only occupants were this puny handful of assorted individuals. "I don't like it at all," he repeated.

All of us liked it even less when the entire hall suddenly shuddered in sympathy with some distant explosion. I cast a doubtful glance towards the gloom-shrouded roof, but luckily no debris came down and none of the natives took any notice.

The "Three S's" assumed leadership of the human party. Inter-X procedure lays down that the first landing squad to embark upon any major line of investigation sees it through to the end, receiving what support or assistance may be necessary from other teams in the area.

Simpson's squad had first contacted the inhabitants of Anker-Mo. His man—Sinclair—therefore, opened the negotiations officially by means of the Erikksen books.

So many inhabited worlds have now been discovered that Inter-X has provided a potted version of the oft-told tale about who we are, where we come from, the extent of our scientific knowledge and a brief outline of the principles of democracy. It compresses an enormous amount of information into a brief space, but vastly greater time is almost always needed for explanation of points picked by the audience as containing—for them—most interest.

Kabbah, Emperor of Anker-Mo—the creature squatting in the bowl-shaped throne—possessed an almost endless thirst for details. And no wonder, if, as seemed reasonable, our arrival was his first intimation that the universe contained something more than the single planet over which he ruled. Through the all-enveloping clouds the people of Anker-Mo could see nothing—conscious only of night succeeding day when the dim light of their sun, filtering through that green, vaporous barrier, brought emerald dawn or glaucous dusk. Three moons, which endlessly circled their world, had never cast soft radiance through the gloaming; of stars, comets, nebulae and island galaxies stretching across space without end, they remained totally unaware.

So much explanation became

necessary that Sinclair and I took it in shifts. As a matter of fact, I was glad of having something to take my mind off my feet, which were aching intolerably by having to stand all this time. The faces of Hartnell, Tubby and the others reflected vague envy, because all they understood of events was when Sinclair or myself gave them some idea of what was happening while the other answered Kabbah's questions.

And yet it turned out that this queer, hidden planet held a secret far more important than half a dozen entire galaxies. We learned about it in highly peculiar circumstances.

The conversation had gone round and round some trivial detail to the point of boredom. Simpson, yawning, caught my eye and grinned. "Sorry, I can't put a hand up, Pop. These suits don't allow for proper politeness—"

Next instant two more dull, distinct explosions set the hall shaking again. An enormous rushing and gurgling sound followed.

"Stuttering Sirius!" exclaimed Hartnell. "What's happening?"

I looked closely at Kabbah and company. They didn't seem at all alarmed.

"Well, go on!" said Hartnell, impatiently. "Ask 'em what it's all about."

The thunder and rumbling gradually subsided.

"Oh, Kabbah," inquired Sinclair. "What do these great noises portend?"

"It is the sacred rites. Powerful substances are expended to divert the holy waters into proper channels. You will learn about these ceremonies if you remain here. Within the hour the effect will become apparent."

"But suppose the vibration dislodged masonry in your high buildings," I said anxiously. "Might not some of your people die before their time?"

The yellow eyes stared fixedly into mine. "Before their time? I do not understand."

Sinclair expounded competently upon human expectation of life.

"How pitifully brief!" exclaimed Kabbah, when the matter had been fully explained. "How much more you might achieve if the life-span could be doubled—or trebled—"

"Trebled?" I said, aghast. "But that—that's impossible!"

The yellow eyes stared at me rather scornfully. "Not for us. We of Anker-Mo have not only trebled our years—we never die."

I straightened my aching back inside the suit, feeling the movement set little trickles of sweat running down between my shoulder blades. I took a firmer grip of the Erikksen sheets and started to work out the translation again. For a moment I thought he'd said the people of this odd planet never died.

Then I saw Sinclair's shocked, pale face. The tension stretched like a thick rubber cable while our minds strove to absorb a

statement that was, frankly, quite unbelievable.

"Did . . . you . . . hear . . . what . . . I did?" The words plopped one by one into a great, turgid pool of amazement.

I nodded.

"Better get to the bottom of it. Must be some mistake——"

I pulled myself together. "How," I asked, carefully, "is such a remarkable state of affairs achieved?"

Kabbah raised himself and gestured with a tentacle. The half dozen creatures who had been listening motionless throughout the cross-examination suddenly commenced to gyrate rapidly in some ceremonial exercise, whereupon three others entered, their leader bearing aloft a platter on which rested a heap of small cubes, each about an inch across.

"Behold," said Kabbah. "The Elixir of Life—concentrated, powerful!"

Sinclair and I tried to explain to the others, only to be greeted by outraged cries of disbelief.

"Fantastic!" said Simpson flatly.

"He's pulling your legs!" said Schweigmann.

Hartnell made little "tsk-tsk" sounds of disgust and said he knew all the time we weren't to be trusted with the Erikksen books.

"Might have known they'd mess it up," agreed Tubby.

Furiously, I shoved my copy under his nose. "You have a try if you think it's so confoundedly easy!"

"It's true!" said Sinclair, in a shocked whisper.

The others stared at us for a long moment. Then their features, too, paled noticeably while the stupendous implications slowly dawned upon them.

As might be expected by those who know him, young Hartnell was first to recover. He grinned at Simpson and said, magnanimously: "It's all yours—by Inter-X rules! I don't know what you're going to do with it, though——"

Sinclair seemed overwhelmed and unable to speak, letting the hand holding the Erikksen sheets fall weakly to his side. In fact, he looked about as limp as I felt.

Seeing this, Simpson gulped, pulled himself together, then moved to my side. His heavy eyebrows clamped into a dark, anxious line. I didn't envy him a bit. "Come on, Pop! Speak up nicely and ask if we can have some! I'll have to rush it to the controller——"

To tell the truth, I hesitated. Suppose the tentacled individuals held these cubes in high veneration and were indignant at the idea? And suppose the stuff worked with them but not with human beings——

Yet, somehow, I knew in my heart that this second objection wasn't true. Anker-Mo's atmosphere contained sizeable quantities of oxygen. It was reasonable, therefore, to presume that the planet's animal life had constructed itself upon an oxygen-carbon base, like our own, instead of any chlorine-silicon or fluorine-boron foundation. Upon this reasoning, any substance that

enabled Kabbah's people to live for ever could also work with our kind.

For, after all, what was this business of "growing old?" Not any failing of the body as a whole, but a gradual inability of the components to renew themselves fully. The body is not only living as a unit, but in uncounted billions of the tiny separate cells which compose it—rounded bone cells; thin, flat skin cells; long, cigar-shaped cells of muscle. And while the composite organism carries on unheeding, all these microscopic specks of protoplasm are living their own tiny lives—always with others to replace those that have fulfilled their function and shrivelled into debris.

It's a solemn thought that once a person reaches adulthood the body he inhabits today—although exhibiting little outward change—isn't the same body he had seven or ten years ago. That's roughly the time taken for all cells in the human anatomy to change completely. And in ten years more he'll have another entirely different body.

Yet—and here's the snag—subsequent cells are never quite so vigorous as those they replace. The skin gradually loses its bloom, the muscles their springiness, the bones become more brittle—until at last the human machine runs down and stops.

But suppose this uncanny substance from Anker-Mo really did regenerate flesh—what then? I didn't know about "living for ever." "Ever" could be a very

long time. Certainly, though, it might have the effect of prolonging bodily efficiency by helping cells to renew themselves more thoroughly. If, as Kabbah had said, the human life-span could be even doubled or trebled the effects would change the entire course of history.

"Go on, Pop!" said Simpson again. "Ask him!"

Kabbah saved me the trouble. With one tentacle he delicately picked a cube off the platter and dropped it in my gloved palm. He reached for another and gave it to Simpson.

"Wait," said Kabbah. "The Elixir must first be blessed."

An official stepped forward holding a wand which bore at one end some peculiar, holy emblem. He weaved strange patterns in the air over the tubes, then fell back into the ranks of his assistants, who immediately embarked upon mysterious chanting, the words of which baffled the Erikksen books. After a few minutes of this they began ceremonial dances, prancing and bobbing bewilderingly in the dim, purple light until a climax was reached in which half a dozen poised themselves on the tip of one tentacle and commenced to whirl like teetotums.

Hartnell snapped his fingers in sudden inspiration. This was foolish, because strange creatures are apt to construe abrupt gestures as disrespectful or even hostile.

I said so, but he took no notice.

"Spinning Jennies!"

I jumped. "Eh?"

"That's what we'll call 'em! I've been trying all the time to think of a name——"

"Tchah!" I said. Here we were, on the brink of an epoch-making discovery, and all he could think about was finding comic descriptions.

Simpson grinned. "It's as good as any other!"

If the natives resented such idle chatter during their sacred rites, they made no audible protest, and eventually the Ceremony of Blessing came to an end.

"These specimens of the Elixir we give you," said Kabbah solemnly, "in token of friendship, for I see that this matter is important to you and your kind. You say that your great ship awaits you, hovering in bright sunlight beyond the green clouds that encompass our world. Take this present, then, with the greetings of Anker-Mo and its people."

He waved another tentacle, whereupon an acolyte teetered rapidly forward with two small, weirdly decorated caskets. "Place the cubes therein, that they may be formally presented to your esteemed masters in fitting style——"

A gong boomed. The sound shivered into silence in the heights of that immense, dark roof.

Scurrying activity promptly broke out, with quite a number of the tentacled things running to and fro amid the purple shadows, bringing narrow, foot-long cylinders which they stacked neatly at the side of an altar in the gloom behind Kabbah's

throne. Two officials checked them as they were brought. It was curious to see how the Spinning Jennies performed what Tubby described as "counting on their fingers." The "fingers" were so numerous and so long that they accommodated a respectable total.

I was more interested, though, in the nature of those cylinders, especially when a couple of Jennies quite obviously tested one. The end of each tube carried an embossed emblem, although the shadows were too dim for my straining eyes to make out its pattern. The two prodded and examined the thing for a few moments. Then, unexpectedly, it shot out a bright beam of purple light.

Hartnell said: "Galloping galaxies! What's that?"

Apparently satisfied, the two officials switched off the gadget and began counting once more. Individuals who brought in cylinders received others from another stack in exchange, but instead of scurrying away with them, once more they lined up along the back of the hall, waiting. Waiting for what?

Kabbah, still peering over the rim of the bowl, noticed my curiosity. "You have observed one of the Lights of Anker-Mo. While we enjoy the Hour of Purple, none save purple illumination must be employed to lighten ways that are dark. Soon you will see the marvellous transformation to the Hour of Crimson, during which red lights are used." He gestured to a third stack of

cylinders on his left, which I had not previously seen. "After that comes the Hour of Blue. Thus it has been since time began——"

"And very pretty it must look, too," said young Hartnell sardonically.

"Shut up," I said. Even though Kabbah failed to understand words he might guess something from the tone of voice.

The Jennies remained silent and motionless. We stood there with them so long and expectantly that I felt like screaming. When, eventually, the manifestation occurred we could well have imagined ourselves watching some elaborate stage setting. The purple glow from walls, floor and throne changed over a period of about half a minute to brilliant vermilion. The Hour of Red? And the Hour of Blue? Did it mean that the basic colour of Anker-Mo eternally altered itself in this rotation?

The place, now transformed, looked like some ancient representation of one of the lower pits of hell. There were the pillars and decorations of that fantastic cavern, ourselves hooded and helmeted in atmosphere suits, the thing squatting in the bowl-shaped throne and staring with eyes that still shone yellow—everything bathed in an all-pervading blood-red glow. It had been bad enough before, when sinister purple dimly illuminated the scene. Now it was frankly horrible.

The small cube of Elixir still resting in my hand changed colour, too—from deep amethyst to bright crimson.

"This is all very well," said Simpson, frowning. He popped the cube inside the presentation casket, intending to stand no further nonsense. "First I want to learn how this stuff's used. Then me and my lot had better get back to the ship. O.K.?"

I didn't feel particularly happy about matters. The old saying about "strength in numbers" contains a good deal of sense, and while Hartnell, Tubby and myself usually manage to keep any situation in hand, I would have felt much easier with continued support from stalwarts such as the "Three S's."

Kabbah seemed to shrug when I asked him for details. "The Elixir is ingested with food substances. As for quantities, I cannot help you, seeing that your requirements may be quite different from our own. No doubt the scientists in your great ship will be able to determine such matters when the gifts are presented."

Simpson, dissatisfied, grunted. "We'd better go, then. You'll wait here to welcome the top lads from the Scientific Panel?"

I groaned. I hadn't thought about that. High officials of Inter-X—who sat in the sacred upper portions of the ship and whom we lesser mortals never saw—would naturally descend in strength on Anker-Mo to examine the source of so stupendous a substance as the Elixir of Life. Gloomily, I saw before me endless vistas of weary months during which they demanded my services as interpreter.

"We'll hold the fort here," said Hartnell. "You trot off back. And tell 'em to relieve us quickly, else we'll go colour-blind!"

Sinclair made a short, impressive speech of farewell to Kabbah and company. The yellow eyes never altered in expression and the listening group of Spinning Jennies never moved.

At the finish there was a queer pause, during which I sensed inexplicable tension.

"Tell your masters," said Kabbah slowly, "that we shall welcome their presence among us. We realise from what you have said that many worlds await this great gift from Anker-Mo. It shall be presented to them freely——"

The "Three S's" prepared to leave.

"So long," said young Hartnell. "Give our kind regards to the controllers."

Schweigmann pulled a face. Sinclair chuckled with relief while he stowed away the Erikksen sheets. Simpson grinned all over his dark face and waved a hand. Then they turned and moved slowly from the eerie red light of the great hall. It was the last we ever saw of them.

Kabbah heaved himself from the bowl and slid nimbly down the pedestal. "To you who are remaining—although I would have thought that you, also, might have hastened with our gift to your fellow men, I present Moolah, my counsellor and confidant. He will help and advise you during my absence on affairs of state."

So saying, he glided away with quick, tiny steps, followed by his retinue.

All departed save two guards over each stack of cylindrical lights and a creature who waited in the magenta shadows near the throne. This last individual stepped out and identified himself. "I am Moolah, O Strangers from the Void——"

"I don't like this chap" said Tubby, unexpectedly.

Next instant the hall rocked and quivered with another of those peculiar explosions.

Hartnell had something on his mind. "Kabbah spoke about diverting water." He frowned. "I'd like to know more. Can we get a bit of sense out of this specimen here?"

Moolah didn't bother with long-winded explanations. "Come—you shall see for yourselves."

He led us from the main hall into a corridor from which rose steep ramps with footholds that might have been satisfactory to a multi-tentacled denizen of Anker-Mo yet proved highly precarious for anybody with ordinary feet. Young Hartnell made a kind of joke about this, but nobody laughed. Everywhere remained bathed in that horrible, fiery glow.

We reached another corridor which turned and twisted about a good deal. Eventually, Moolah gestured dramatically along a small tunnel. "Before we continue on our way to the parting of the waters, pause to observe the Shrine of the Elixir!"

Peeping through a narrow, slotted aperture in the wall I saw Kabbah's throne reproduced in miniature, set upon a pedestal rising from a solid plinth. And there, within the bowl, rested yet another of the little cubes, glowing redly not only in the radiance all around, but outlined by a brilliant, crimson spotlight. This strong beam issued from one end of a tube similar to those we had seen stacked near the altar in the great hall.

It was quite an impressive tableau, and we expressed ourselves with suitable solemnity. Moolah, apparently satisfied, waved a tentacle gravely and we pressed on.

Before long we were panting and sweating inside the suits. Our route lay so steeply upwards that the trip seemed more like mountain climbing than a journey through rocky corridors, but at length we emerged—rather to our astonishment—upon a ledge quite high in the foothills. Not only our surroundings, but the change of colour, provided a shock. Instead of blood-red radiance all around we stood once more under that dull, emerald sky, looking up at the slowly swirling clouds which surrounded Anker-Mo.

To our left, indicated by Moolah, three sizeable streams ran across the steep, unsymmetric terrain. Even as we stared through the green gloom a burst of dust and spray broke from the mountain-side. Three or four seconds later the shock of the explosion thudded against our suits, while the hill

upon which we stood trembled in sympathy and thunder-echoes rumbled protestingly from distant crags.

"I think I spot what they're up to," said Hartnell, who has something of an engineer's eye for such matters. "They're trying to run all three streams together into that basin there—see? The one with the small outlet leaving its lower end——"

We looked and pondered.

"That stream goes underground a little way beyond," said Tubby. "Now why——?"

Hartnell shrugged. "We've got a guide. Let's ask him."

I got busy with the Erikksen books again.

"It is part of the miracle of Anker-Mo," announced Moolah solemnly. "Since time began these waters have fed the wondrous mechanism which alters the colour of our city at predestined hours——"

Frankly, I didn't understand the idea at all. This stream, I gathered, rushed and tumbled underground into a large, natural basin, from which it overflowed into a second and, eventually, a third. At this point a gigantic subterranean chunk of rock, containing the three basins, tilted on its axis because of the weight of water, thereby spilling it out. Relieved of this burden, the enormous mass returned to its original position and the procedure began all over again.

In this way, and by means of weirs, channels and runnels, the flow of water beneath Anker-Mo

became regulated at three distinct, separate rates—one, presumably, for purple; another for vermilion and a third for blue. But precisely how the quantity of flow changed those queer colours remained a mystery.

Hartnell thought it might be something to do with humidity affecting radiation or chemical activity in lower caverns through which the water ran, and speculated (rather foolishly, I thought) about "rainbows gone barmy" in times of drought.

"That's what they're guarding against with this work of diverting the streams," I said, but he only laughed.

Tubby grabbed my sleeve. "Hey—look over there! Through that cleft in the rocks——"

We could see a stretch of bare plain quite a way below us, and in the centre of our field of vision rested Simpson's scout ship. Even while we jostled for a better view, twinkling pink flames appeared from the vessel's pre-heating units. Then main jets fired and for a moment she rested in the centre of a bright, orange-coloured flower, with dust blasted from solid rock rolling outwards like some strange fog.

We all knew a peculiar emotion at realising that this little ship was bound on the first stage of a journey that would not finish until the momentous news she bore had spread across yawning voids between the stars and among all the planets that swing round them in endless orbit, bringing a cosmic chorus of exultation.

No longer need life-work of great scientists be prematurely cut short; with fewer years wasted in enfeebled old age, experts could carry on longer their researches into art, industry and literature. Death—the Dark Angel himself, with all the loss and sorrow that followed in his wake—was in retreat. These were the tidings our friends were taking from the queer planet of Anker-Mo—a world so far known merely as AM33/2 on astronomers' charts, but a name destined to be repeated in ten thousand language-forms in pœans of thanksgiving.

Scout Ship 46G rose slowly from the ground, gained swift momentum and streaked towards the green sky. Dull thunder of yet another explosion mingled with the tumble of her exhaust jets and rolled towards us across the valleys, but we took no notice. It seemed that a bright, pink-tipped star moved for a short time across the clouds, growing smaller and smaller.

When the ship was out of sight we waited without speaking. At last, Tubby sighed. "Well," he said. "They've gone."

Another explosion boomed and echoed round the mountain ridges.

"Busy little blasters, aren't they?" said Hartnell. "If all their work had a bit more purpose behind it than a glorified kaleidoscope——" He paused. "That last bang was a bit different, wasn't it?"

"Crisper, somehow," I agreed.

"Is our ship all right? We

ought to be able to see it from here."

"Farther behind that spur of rock, I think——"

A faint, whistling wail, rapidly growing louder, sounded from the sky. Our heads went up and three pairs of eyes searched the clouds, but we could see nothing. The noise slashed past us like an enormous steel whip and vanished among the rocks.

I glanced enquiringly at Moolah. He continued staring upwards. I could read no emotion in his wide, yellow eyes.

Then the sound became repeated—not singly, but in discordant chorus, as though a swarm of screeching deamons swooped invisibly upon us.

"Blazing Betelguese!" exclaimed Hartnell. "What the——?"

"Something's falling!" yelled Tubby. "Get under cover!"

My legs seemed glued to the rock. I couldn't move. Falling?

Ear-splitting shrieks rose swiftly to crescendo, hurtling straight upon our heads.

"Under this ledge, Pop!" shouted Hartnell. "Quick!"

Petrified, in a cold sweat, I still stood there.

A dozen more steel whips lashed the sky. Then the noise ended in a dull metallic clattering. The sound had been deceptive. The nearest object fell fully fifty yards away, bouncing down the hillside with hollow clankings.

In a daze of horror, with an invisible hand squeezing my heart so cruelly I felt I must choke, I recognised one of the things that

had hurtled down from the swirling green clouds. It was a ten-foot piece of corominium plating—not glistening now as it did when forming part of the hull of Scout Ship 46G, but twisted and warped and blackened by the fiery blast that had ripped it apart.

With a trembling finger I switched down the telescopic visor in my facepiece. Lodged in a rough place among the rocks some distance below was an unmistakable jet port. I didn't know where the rest of the debris had gone. For that matter I didn't much care. I couldn't see, anyway, because of the tears that blurred my eyes. All I could think of was that the "Three S's" were gone for ever. Somewhere above those evil green clouds—before they could have found time even to radio the controller—Simpson, Sinclair and Schweigmann had vanished with their ship in one coruscating, split-second flash of white heat. Occasionally, fuel-feed reservoirs of small vessels did explode at take-off for no apparent reason, but we'd never yet lost one from *Old Growler* in such a fashion.

Anyway, there it was. They were gone. Sick, bewildered, I lowered myself to a large stone and rested my helmet in my hands. Now it was our turn to take Anker-Mo's gift from this shrouded world and present it to a wondering universe.

After an unspecified interval, during which each of us was alone with his private misery, I

heard young Hartnell sigh. "Well—come on," he said brusquely. "We've got work to do——"

I raised my head and looked around. "Where's Moolah?"

Tubby shrugged. "Search me. Must have dodged back into the tunnels. Not that I blame him——"

We went back into the blood-red corridors, following the ramps downwards in the hope that we might come again to the shrine or the throne-room. Instead we got lost.

"This light," said Tubby, uneasily. "Gets on your nerves."

I looked at my watch. "Cheer up. It changes every hour, doesn't it? Only forty minutes to go——"

"Hey!" said Hartnell. "See that?"

"What?"

"One of the Jennies—dived down that side turning."

Tubby frowned. "You must be dreaming——"

"All right," I said soothingly. "At least we can have a look."

The diversion had most surprising consequences. We found ourselves peering into a long, narrow room lined with a series of separate padded depressions. Each of these hollows, filled with some kind of spongy substance, was occupied by a native of Anker-Mo who lay there, tentacles folded beneath him, motionless beneath the red light which here, also, glowed from the walls.

"What in Sirius is this place?" whispered Hartnell.

A Spinning Jenny materialised suddenly and silently from behind the entrance wall, making us

jump. He didn't seem particularly surprised at finding three alien creatures confronting him. No doubt word of our arrival had already spread.

I grabbed the Erikksen sheets again and repeated Hartnell's question.

Even before he spoke I got the idea that this particular Jenny was nonplussed, though the expression in his yellow eyes didn't alter. "Doing? You ask that of me—Akashi, Keeper of the Invisible Gate?"

It didn't seem to get us much farther. What in Antares was the Invisible Gate?

"You ask me what they are doing?" he went on, with dignity. "Is it not obvious that they are dying?"

There have been three, possibly four, occasions when I remember so overwhelming a sense of astonished horror that the ground seemed to fall away beneath my feet and everything grew dim, as though I spun into some bottomless pit. Desperately, I forced trembling knees to hold me upright. A dreadful, violent nausea churned coldly in the pit of my stomach, while every pore suddenly spurted clammy sweat.

"You all right, Pop?" asked Hartnell.

I took no notice. I stared back at Akashi and tried to control chattering teeth. "Dying?" I croaked. "But—but people don't die on Anker-Mo! There's the Elixir—the Elixir of Life!"

Akashi actually shrugged, and his next words, although quietly

spoken, sounded like the ultimate trumpet call of madness. For a moment I felt myself going utterly and completely out of my mind. "I know of no such substance," he said, "desirable though it may be——"

Two other natives appeared at his side, muttering.

"So be it," said Akashi. He turned to me again. "Another has reached the end of his time and passed through the Invisible Gate. See——"

The two assistants lifted one of the Jennies from the padded bowl and half-carried, half-dragged him away. With the tentacles trailing he might have been a bundle of limp seaweed.

Hartnell stared along the rows. "What are they doing with that one?"

I told him.

I don't ever want to see again on any human face the sort of look that gradually crept over young Hartnell's features. His profile might slowly have petrified to pale marble, while his eyes hardened to chips of sapphire. I felt my hair slowly rising on end.

"There isn't any Elixir," I said, soberly. "It's a fraud, a swindle, a deception, a soulless lie——"

His lips, clamped into a tight line of fury, opened and snapped at me like a steel trap. "I heard you the first time!"

"These cubes, then," said Tubby aghast. "What's the idea?"

All our magnificent dreams of spreading a boon across the

universe crumbled into dust and ashes. I stood there, conscious of an immense, hollow despondency.

Yet this did not fully explain matters. What was Kabbah's purpose in so cruel a hoax?

I decided to leave no possible margin for error. "All these creatures are waiting here to die?"

"Indeed," answered Akashi. "For such is our way on Anker-Mo. When a person feels his time come upon him, he repairs hither that I may make a mark against his name in the great book and stay with him until the moment arrives for his soul to pass through the Gate of which I am Keeper. Thus it happens to all, from the highest to the lowest."

"Why, then," I asked, in a grating tone, "did Kabbah himself tell us that the people of Anker-Mo never die—that they live for ever, thanks to the Elixir of Life, some of which rests in this box?" I snatched open the little casket and thrust it near his "face."

For the first time I saw a Spinning Jenny's eyes definitely flicker. For the first time, too, I saw one who was afraid.

"Kabbah told you this?" He seemed to be looking round for a place to hide. "Then I must speak no more! The affair obviously possesses keen political importance——"

It was all very well for him to say that, but he wasn't going to get away with matters so easily.

"Why did Kabbah deceive us? What exactly is this peculiar cube?"

He was really frightened now. The three of us stood over him like avenging demons in the red glow. He cowered. "I must not speak! I cannot betray the emperor! Go—go quickly whence you came, O Strangers, and say naught of what I have told. If Kabbah learns I have spoiled his plans he will kill me as well as you——"

What devilish idea lay behind Kabbah's plotting? I wondered again about the "Three S's." Were they, perhaps, so excited in taking off with what we believed to be Anker-Mo's boon that proper precautions were neglected? Was that why the ship blew up?

"If you ask me," said Tubby tensely, "that confounded stuff's some sort of explosive!"

I jumped so violently that the cube sprang out of the box and landed on the rock at my feet. For one awful moment we stood transfixed, then dived simultaneously for shelter behind the nearest wall.

Nothing happened, so I crawled outrathersheepishy under Akashi's blank stare, picked up the cube gingerly and put it back in the box.

"Don't say things like that!" I protested. "If it was, then our piece would have gone off as well as Simpson's——"

"Anyway," said Hartnell, "this chap's not only blown the gaff properly, as they used to say, but he's spoken a bit of good sense, too."

"You mean about getting out of here quickly?"

He nodded.

"If we can," said Tubby, pessimistically.

I rammed a chunk of fast-spoken logic down Akashi's throat. "If we leave Anker-Mo, Kabbah need never learn what you have told us," I said. "Therefore, it is to your advantage to guide us away from here to where our ship rests."

"But my patients. How can I leave them? Am I not the Keeper of the Invisible Gate?"

"Come on," said Hartnell brutally. "Tell him they'll find their way through all right!"

Akashi didn't like the idea, but he realised that if we were caught it was all up with him, and started off rapidly through tortuous labyrinths. Once he motioned us back hurriedly and we dodged behind a shelf of rock until a party of Spinning Jennies passed. No particular hue-and-cry seemed in progress, however.

The tunnels grew smaller and dimmer. Eventually the red glow almost died away in secret corridors which Akashi chose as providing best chances of avoiding detection. The illumination became so bad that I switched on my own torch to see where we were going. It was, peculiarly enough, the first white light our eyes had known since we landed on this unholy planet.

And Akashi screamed! "Put it out! Quickly!" He was almost beside himself with sheer terror.

"This light—this white light—is our custom," I told him. "It

is quite harmless. Have no fear.”
“Put it out!” he cried despairingly.

I didn’t argue. I switched off.
“Why?”

“It—it terrifies me——”

“Is white light unknown on Anker-Mo?”

“No, we have it here. But——”
He paused.

“But what?”

“I—I do not know. I am afraid, that is all——”

He was lying. Yet where was the purpose? What was the answer to the sinister riddle of these lights of Anker-Mo—the melancholy purple, the bright, gory red and (yet to come) the blue?

“If the light is insufficient for your eyes,” said Akashi, recovering somewhat, “take my regulation torch, suitable for the Hour of Crimson, which we now enjoy.”

The Jennies must have had queer ideas about enjoyment. He was merely trying to change the subject. I didn’t say anything. Whether he interpreted the silence as denoting displeasure I couldn’t tell, but in a further attempt to curry favour he thrust the cylinder in my hand. “See—here is a small hole that must be covered by a tentacle to bring the light into being. Behold the three other apertures, whose function is to regulate the brightness——”

I tried the idea and found it worked. A vivid beam of red swept along the tunnel ahead of us—at first full strength but reducing its intensity as I stretched fingers rather awkwardly to cover the adjusting holes.

How the thing operated I hadn’t the faintest idea, although Hartnell spoke learnedly of atmospheric activated radiations. I didn’t have opportunity to think about it much, though, because Hartnell suddenly halted in his tracks and gripped my arm so viciously that it felt like a bite by a hammadokki from Zenna II. The action swung up the red torch, so that I saw his face bathed in a dramatic glow. He wore the same hard, intent, terrifying expression I’d seen before.

“That torch! Give it to me—and don’t argue!”

I never intended to argue.

“How much time have we got?”

“Until when?”

He stared at me as though I were half-witted. “Until the light changes, of course!”

I glanced at my watch. “Almost thirty minutes—if it happens on time.”

His lips clamped grimly. “It’d better!”

We took a desperately long while to find the place he wanted. Akashi had never heard of it, and although he proved some help with general directions, his main concern became focused on his precious torch, which Hartnell now held so possessively that the owner suspected (rightly, as it happened) he would never get the thing back.

“For if the red torch is not handed in,” he said plaintively, “the officials will not issue me with a blue torch when the moment is ripe. A proper torch is essential to my duties——”

"Use the red one, then!" said Hartnell, and laughed abruptly. It wasn't a nice laugh, either.

Akashi stood aghast. "That is forbidden! It is the foulest sacrilege!"

"I'll bet it is!" snarled Hartnell.

We paid no attention to Akashi's further protests, but pressed on along more corridors and ramps.

"What are you up to?" demanded Tubby suspiciously.

Hartnell didn't answer.

I raised one eyebrow helplessly. I didn't know, either.

Eventually we arrived at the shrine—that small, lonely cell containing a miniature of Kabbah's throne, the little cube and the glaring red spotlight. Hartnell dodged inside and looked carefully round the shining, irregular walls until he saw a small cleft about eight feet high which apparently suited his purpose. He then took from the repair pack—used to slap emergency patches on atmosphere suits—two circles of adhesive plastic. One patch closed the aperture at the back of the torch, setting it brilliantly aglow; the other adjusted the intensity of the beam by half-shutting two control holes.

When he wedged the torch in the cleft (where it could easily pass unnoticed) the red beam, shining through the general crimson radiance of identical hue, was completely invisible. And that unseen beam was focussed precisely on the small cube which rested within the model of Kabbah's throne!

"What's the idea?" I said baffled.

"The idea" said Hartnell grimly, "is to get out of here—quick!"

"My torch!" wailed Akashi. "You are leaving it there?"

"Tell him to come with us—unless he wants to pass through the invisible gates when he least expects to!"

I interpreted, whereupon Akashi nodded miserably. "What else remains for me, save to throw in my lot with your own, O Strangers, seeing that by now I shall have been missed from my post and Kabbah's executioners undoubtedly seek me——?"

A slither and scurry sounded along a side turning.

"Back there!" I hissed. "Where they won't see us!"

"What did I say?" inquired Akashi with gloomy satisfaction.

There were eight in the party which headed for the little room. They tripped rapidly inside on teetering tentacle-tips, while we watched breathlessly from sheltering shadows some fifteen yards away.

The errand didn't take them long. They were dismantling the cunning little showpiece put on for our benefit. They came out carrying the cube of "elixir" and their own torch which had provided the spotlight. They hadn't noticed the less brilliant light young Hartnell fixed up.

"What now?" asked Tubby. "I don't know what your game is, but they seem to have scotched it."

"Oh, no, they haven't! Here—give me your chunk of that stuff, Pop!"

I opened the casket and obliged. Inexplicably, I began to sweat again.

Hartnell gently placed the cube in the same spot where the other had rested, squinted at Akashi's torch to make certain it still emitted that red beam which merged so uncannily with the general radiance and nodded. He jerked a thumb. "Come on!"

"Where?"

"Back to the ship, of course."

I looked at Tubby and he looked at me. "But why?"

"Because soon the colour's going to change to blue. And when it does——"

I clenched my teeth. "Well?"

Hartnell's face hardened into the expression of an avenging demon. "Poor old Simpson and Co. can rest easy!"

I still didn't get it. I took another glance at my watch. There were about twenty minutes to go. We were still in the corridors and trying to keep up with Al'ashi, who was certainly getting a move on now that he'd reached his decision.

"White light!" exclaimed Tubby suddenly. His eye widened and his features grew unusually moist and pallid.

Everywhere still looked red enough to me.

"You spotted it, eh?" said Hartnell with a grim laugh. "Elixir of Life, my foot! Those cubes are the explosive they're

using to blast the river beds—and the stuff's detonated by white light!"

I stopped dead from sheer astonishment but Tubby, pushing behind, shoved me on. Now I remembered a phrase used by the detestable Kabbah during the solemn mockery of that presentation ceremony—how we'd told him about *Old Growler* hovering above the green clouds, reflecting from her further side the white light of Anker-Mo's sun. And he'd urged us to keep the little cubes in the light-tight caskets "to be presented to your masters in fitting style." No, Kabbah didn't particularly want to kill only us or the "Three S's"—he aimed to plant his explosives in *Old Growler* herself and blast all intruders out of the sky together as soon as the boxes were opened!

I remembered other phrases, too—apparently harmless at the time, but now seen to be fraught with sinister intent. "We are a shy people who value our privacy," he had said, "and do not care to be overlooked by anyone."

Well, he'd done his best to prevent anyone from Inter-X peeking in on them again. He and his councillors had hatched the fantastic scheme concerning the "elixir," and except for the fact that Simpson had priority we might have been the ones who opened the casket on our way back to *Old Growler* and perished in a single, corruscating flash.

Moolah was obviously in the plot, too, but fled when Simpson's

ship blew up—fearing either the alarming rain of debris or our own vengeance. Yet Akashi, upon whom we stumbled accidentally because of Moolah's desertion, didn't know about the deadly deception and blurted out enough for us to learn the truth. He was aware about detonating the stuff with white light, though. Else why did he scream when, with the cube in my possession, I switched on a white lamp?

"If you're hoping to blow the place up with that cube and the red torch," I said, "I still don't see how it will work."

We were slithering and scrambling down rocks towards the plain where our ship lay.

"Ask Tubby for an elementary lesson in primary colours," said young Hartnell.

I didn't get that lesson immediately, because just then we sighted the vessel. We had emerged from the foothill pass and saw her standing in the middle of the plain, her slender length pointing like a lovely, silvery-green finger.

Akashi looked and commenced to tremble. "Is it true, O Strangers, that this machine actually spits fire and flies beyond the clouds to other worlds?"

"Yes," I said. "There you will find refuge until such time as it is safe for you to return."

"I do not think I dare trust myself to so dreadful an engine. Let me leave you here. There are places on Anker-Mo where I shall be safe from Kabbah——"

"As you please," I said, indifferently, and watched him scam-

per with relief back to the rocks. I had more than Akashi on my mind just then.

About ten minutes remained before Anker-Mo's internal corridors were due to change colour. I shivered involuntarily. What was young Hartnell's plan?

"Red, blue and yellow," I said. "They're the three primary colours, and you can make any others from them."

"What about white?" asked Hartnell. "If you mix red, blue and yellow paint you just get a dirty great splodge of mud."

"I know that," I said irritably, "but we're talking about light, aren't we? If you paint a spinning top in red, blue and yellow sections it looks white when it goes round fast."

"How about trying it with a Spinning Jenny?" asked Tubby. The two young fools then guffawed together for quite a time. Me, I didn't feel a bit like laughing.

"Sorry, Pop," said Hartnell, becoming serious again. "But you're on the wrong track. Primary colours for light aren't red, blue and yellow. They're reddish-orange, purple and blue-green."

Exasperated, I demanded: "How can they be? You couldn't even get a pale yellow light from dark colours like those, let alone pure white!"

"You don't need me to tell you," said Hartnell patiently, "that white light contains all the colours of the spectrum—violet, blue, green, yellow, orange and red—or that we see certain objects in a particular colour because

some of the rays are reflected and others absorbed."

I pursed my lips. He sounded confident enough. I hoped he wasn't going to make me look too much of a dunderhead.

"If you shine a beam of white light through reddish-orange glass, what do you get?"

"Reddish-orange light," I said. That seemed easy enough.

"So it means, doesn't it, that violet, blue and green were absorbed by the glass?"

I thought carefully. "Yes."

"So if you shine together a reddish-orange light and a blue-green light you're merely putting back the colour elements and re-assembling white light, aren't you?"

I still didn't think it would work.

"It does," said Hartnell. "Take it from me. Provided you focus the two beams on a white surface——"

In the devastating flood of understanding that rushed into my mind, I borrowed one of his own phrases. "Stuttering Sirius!" I said. "Those cubes—they looked purple under the purple light and red under the red light!"

He nodded in a pleased way. "Exactly! Which means their true colour's—white!"

"Even though you've got that red torch fixed up," I said, "you can't be absolutely sure Anker-Mo's third light is really blue-green."

"There's the purple," insisted Hartnell confidently. "And that red's got a definite orange tinge.

It's bound to be—by the very nature of things."

"You can't be certain," I repeated stubbornly.

Tubby spoke suddenly. "I'm certain of one thing. We'd better run!"

Startled, I snapped my head round and promptly suffered a painful crick of the neck. Fully fifty Jennies poured from the nearest end of that pass through the hills and ran after us at alarming speed. They didn't teeter on tentacle-tips now, or bother about spinning. They moved with long, quick, noiseless strides. Their deadly intentions were never in doubt.

"Come on!" yelled Hartnell.

I would never have dreamt the things could cover ground so quickly. They came after us like racehorses, while despite all our own puffing and panting it seemed we fought a way along an avenue ankle-deep in treacle.

After the first two hundred yards I knew it was no use. Still straining forward, with lungs at bursting point despite having oxygen fully turned on, I expected at any moment to feel myself dragged backwards by the curling grip of a tentacle.

Then, when I was at the very end of sweating, desperate effort, there sounded from somewhere behind us an enormous thundering detonation that set the entire plain shuddering beneath our feet and roared back and forth among the valleys and slopes of the country beyond those foothills.

The blast wave—an almost solid pressure of air—shoved me face down to the ground like a great, invisible hand. My nose hit the inside of the facepiece with a smack that brought tears streaming from my eyes. In spite of this, and the crick in my neck, I managed to direct attention to other things. "The ship!" I thought. "She'll go over——"

I raised my head. Despite a blurred gaze I could have sworn that, for one awful moment, the vessel—not fifty yards away—rocked against the hurricane. "The ship!" I cried aloud.

I couldn't hear myself. Neither could the others, although they guessed from my flailing gestures what I was trying to say. That terrible impact of sound—like a giant slamming some colossal iron door—had temporarily robbed us of hearing.

An object like a bundle of torn rags flew past on the roaring, rushing wind. Then another and another rolled willy-nilly over the rocky ground into the distance. I'd never bothered much about it before, but the Spinning Jennies, despite their bulk, couldn't have weighed more than a few pounds. We needn't have feared them in any hand-to-hand conflict, after all. We didn't need to prove it now, though.

From where the city of Anker-Mo lay, built into the very stone of the planet from which it took its name, a pillar of opaque dust soared hundreds of feet

high towards those enveloping green clouds. It was so appalling and terrifying a sight that I refused to believe one tiny cube of compressed powder could be responsible. More likely the initial explosion had set off big stores of the stuff.

There came into my poor, numbed mind at that moment a picture—the representation of a queer, bowl-shaped throne flooded with reddish light and a little cube centred under the focus of an invisible beam. And while, in imagination, I watched, the pervading colour changed to bluish-green, so that the secret beam suddenly shone in startling, rosy contrast. For an instant, where it touched the cube, a white glow sprang up—to be instantly extinguished by an immeasurably larger and more vivid blaze of light, so dazzling that it filled the field of vision with an incandescence that blotted out all else.

No one knew how much remained of Kabbah's city. I hoped with all my heart that the ceiling of his huge throne room had fallen in, smashing him to a nameless pulp. It was no less than he deserved.

I hoped, too, that the shades of the "Three S's" looked down and smiled with grim satisfaction on seeing what we had done. Somehow, I felt sure they did.

THE END

QUEST FOR TOMORROW

by KENNETH JOHNS

A topical article dealing with the slow—and sometimes heartbreaking—progress towards turning a dream into concrete reality.

I SUPPOSE THAT THE THOUGHT of a rocket ship taking off in a smother of fire and blasting out into space has taken hold of all our imaginations at one time or another and left us a little weak at the vastness of the promises ahead. And the same touch of awe, I venture to think, holds true when we think a little non-objectively, a little with that sense of wonder, about an aeroplane sailing across the sky.

And for those of you who answer that they never think non-objectively, and that any feeling of wonder is a little childish, I can only reply that you're a better man than nine tenths of your fellows—and you miss out on an awful lot of the zest of life.

Combining something of the source of that feeling—the rocket and the aeroplane—and also giving us a sneak preview of what a small type spaceship may well be like, we can look at the last of the Bell X series of rocket planes. At least—we could have until late last year.

The story is grim, instructive and heartening.

To dramatise a little, it opens on the morning of Thursday, 27th September, 1956. It is a fine,

clear morning, as most mornings are over the Californian United States Air Base. A tiny-winged dart streaks across the transparent sky. Speed mounts: Mach 1 . . . Mach 2 . . . Mach 3 . . . Mach 3.3 . . .

At three and a third times the speed of sound, a record-breaking 2,200 miles an hour, the Bell X-2 rocket plane finishes its fuel, slows, begins to turn. And then, so fast that it is all over in a heartbeat, disaster strikes.

Seconds later a twisted doll, a grotesque bundle of blood, bone and sinew, is plummeting from the sky in a long last thirteen mile drop to the unyielding desert sand below.

That was the dramatic split-second catastrophe in which the £5 million experimental plane ended, and the way Captain Apt died, the latest victim of the killer rockets.

And yet, behind the drama, the headlines, the blood, that exploded from that morning's disaster, we can trace out the story of the "killer rockets" development and see just what they are and what the men who design and fly them are trying to do. And you can be sure that those men, including Captain Apt, don't call them "killer rockets."

When the United States Air Force began its high speed research, it was realised that the many unknown problems of flight at and above the speed of sound were likely to prove deadly. Using manned rocket planes would give America a vital lead in aerodynamic research that might well mean the difference between life and death should another all-out war develop.

So they built eight rocket ships—the Bell X series. Of course, I should add that the U.S. Navy, with their Douglas Skyrocket ships, were in the research race; but it is with the Air Force's Bell X series that we can quite clearly see the pattern of what must follow. Of the eight, four exploded, and now the latest has killed its pilot.

But valuable ground—or air—was gained. Each aircraft was a little better than its predecessor and helped push the altitude and speed records ever higher.

Britain had refused to use manned rockets and had gone ahead with a programme of models. But even the best of models have their limit of usefulness. Models in wind-tunnels, free-flying models, guided missiles telemetering information back, and centrifuge experiments can give only a partial picture of what spatial conditions are likely to be. It seems fairly certain that the Project Vanguard satellites are only the forerunners of larger and more complex moons; but eventually, one day, some man is going to have to be shot up there

in a rocket if only to bolt the sections of the first man-carrying satellite together. We will probe the Moon's unseen surface with robot ships and send them out to Mars; but one day a man will have to follow them.

So that it is true to say that current experiments with rocket planes up there where the atmosphere is so thin that you have to adopt full space techniques for survival, are of very direct value in developing space travel.

When the first experimental ships were built, the almost uncontrollable power of pure rockets was an unknown quantity and the theory alone of controlling planes at Mach 1 and above was still giving designers headaches and nightmares. Faults in design and material were common.

The first in the series, the Bell X-1, was six miles up, booming along under full thrust, when the cockpit canopy slowly began to split.

The pilot was wearing an untested altitude suit, a primitive precursor of the true spacesuit. Instead of losing his air in one fatal gasp, the pilot survived simply because his suit held enough pressure for him to put his plane into a dive and duck down into the thicker levels. Even so, the suit was so rigidly inflated that he could barely move the controls. That taught the designers one lesson. Later, in 1948, the X-1 set a speed record of 967 m.p.h.

Then came the X-1A, an improved version that broke all previous altitude and speed re-

cords. But this design was a near killer as well. In August, 1954, the pilot, Major Chuck Yeager, put the X-1A into a steep dive and fired the four rocket motors at full thrust until the fuel ran out. The plane reached 1,650 m.p.h. But it jumped and shuddered so violently that Yeager was knocked unconscious; he was lucky to recover in time and be in fit condition to land the plane safely. Again, when setting an altitude record, the pilot lost control and span down four sickening miles before regaining command.

The U.S. Air Force Bell X series and the U.S. Navy Douglas Skyrockets were little more than rocket motors fitted with small cockpits and stubby swept-back wings. They were packed skin-tight with an explosive load of liquid oxygen and alcohol. Their size, in comparison with a cruiser, was microscopic; yet both types of ship had the same power output. The bellowing thrust of the rockets produced sufficient energy to move a 10,000 tons displacement ship at 32 knots. When all that power was set the task of shooting a bubble of light alloys through a near vacuum, startling results could confidently be expected.

Even retractable wheels were eliminated to provide more fuel space in the X-2 and the plane touched down on skids on the long, natural runway along the bottom of dried-up Muroc Lake at the Edwards Air Force Research Centre. There was no fear of

over-running the edge of the tarmac there!

These rocket planes are truly at home only far above the Earth. With their strictly limited fuel load which gave only 3 minutes full thrust, they had to be hoisted aloft by a mother ship. These were converted host-bombers; a B-29 was used for the earlier rockets and a B-50 for the later. The usual height for the drop was six miles, where the air has thinned enough to allow the rockets to develop almost all their power potential in thrust.

The X-2 was more needle-shaped than its predecessors. The inordinately long pitot tube was a clear sign of the multi-mach speeds expected. The air pressure built up in a pitot tube drives the air speed mechanism. An interesting problem was encountered here; the speed of the air, violently disturbed, around the ship's skin bore no real relation to the ship's true speed. This had been recognised and pitot tubes protruded some way in advance to clear the bubble. But with the Mach 1 and above speeds of the rockets, the air piled up ahead, waiting its turn to be knifed into, and the readings from short pitot tubes were haywire. The tube had to be extended some feet to thrust its orifice into undisturbed air and thus enable a true reading to be made. The shock waves from the nose of multi Mach planes extends so far that this long proboscis becomes inevitable on all such planes.

The friction encountered at

these speeds presented another formidable obstacle. Even if you don't know how fast you're going, you'll still get there. But if your aircraft just melts around you, you won't. The X series craft were built of special heat-resistant stainless steel and nickel alloy, K-monel, able to withstand 1,000 degrees, Fahrenheit. At this temperature ordinary steel loses its strength and aluminium sags like treacle. In this ability to explore the nebulous heat barrier, where air friction heats and melts the leading edges and noses of fast-flying planes and missiles, the rocket aircraft were blazing a path for spaceships to come. Only by turning aeroplanes into spaceplanes (if you'll pardon the term) and flying out near the edge of space can air impact be reduced and speeds of Mach 4, 5 and 6 be safely maintained for minutes on end. And where the planes went, the spaceships have surely to follow.

In place of the clumsy rocket motor of the X-1A, built of four small chambers that could only be turned on or off separately or in group, the X-2 had only two chambers. But each could be smoothly throttled to yield an infinitely variable thrust. This was a great step forward. The complex metering devices behind this apparently simple device enabled the X-2 to follow accurately a flight programmed to achieve the maximum height or speed from the available fuel. It sounds easy; but it wasn't!

The X-2's power plant was built

by Curtiss-Wright and was backed by new lightweight fuel tanks, pumps and valves, all designed to keep the thrust smooth, long and strong.

The theory was that the rocket would be taken up to six miles; it then accelerated smoothly and gently in the relatively dense air until it reached thirteen miles altitude and the tenuous air; then the throttles would be thrust wide open . . .

Captain Iven Kincheloe has a hobby that many men have. He likes driving vintage cars and possesses a 1924 Vauxhall and a Model A Ford. In the summer of 1956, though, he was riding a mount that very few men have ever bestridden. He boosted the X-2 to a height of 23.9 miles, smashing the altitude record and winning for himself the laurels of the man who has been nearest to space.

Almost seven miles above the previous best, this is one of those achievements that are small steps to the conquest of space, a little victory in the struggle towards infinity, so that, looking back in a few years' time and down from the Moon, it will be impossible to say that *that* pilot or *this* machine was the first to reach space. Each fresh record is a little higher, a little further out, so that one day we will be in space and only then will we wake up and realise that we have crossed that last frontier.

For, although air is still present at twenty-four miles high we are

above the stratosphere and in rarefied air only one 250th as dense as at sea level. To living creatures of our metabolism, this is as good as naked space. Twenty-four miles high is above the ultra-violet absorbing ozone layer and only ten miles below the first radio reflecting ionospheric layer and lower edges of the aurora borealis.

Colonel Frank Everest, Jnr., is another vintage car enthusiast, running a Model A Ford. He managed, in July, 1956, to coax the X-2 to 1,900 m.p.h., Mach 2.9 at a height of thirteen miles. In spite of a malfunctioning rocket motor, he had smashed the speed record. But the best news of this run was that the stainless steel surface had stood up well to the buffeting and heat stresses encountered. This epic achievement was Colonel Everest's last flight in the X-2. The man who had flown the X-1 and been intimately connected with the whole project was, after fourteen years flying, re-assigned to a Staff College appointment.

So it was that test pilot Captain Milburn Apt took over. This was the high-spot of his seven years' career as a test pilot. In all, the X-2 had been flown twenty times by various test pilots and the plane was thought to be safe—at least, as safe as a 2,000 m.p.h. rocket packed with explosives can be expected to be safe under present technological conditions. Previously, new pilots had got the feel of the controls by dropping from a B.50 in a long, fuelless

gliding check. The X-2 was now considered so safe that it was decided that this check was no longer necessary.

And so, in the bright early morning light, when the air is clear and objects stand out sharply, and the upper air currents are less turbulent than during the full heat of the day, Captain Apt walked out and joined the crew of the big four-engined bomber waiting on the apron.

The fully fuelled X-2 was already clipped beneath the spreading bulk of the bomber. It looked very much like a remora clinging to the belly of a shark.

At a height of six miles Captain Apt strapped on his oxygen mask and climbed down through the bomb bay to the tiny cockpit of the slim, cold, waiting X-2. No one then realised the significance of each movement; they were calmly competent, relaxed, of course aware of the significance of their jobs and that they were probably making a contribution to the eventual conquest of space; but it's doubtful if they were thinking about that then. If their thoughts strayed from the job it was probably a quip, or some comment on the ball game or local gossip of the Base. There were wives waiting down there . . .

Apt's check of the controls was swift and he began the countdown of seconds to release point. Seconds after the X-2 had dropped free, the rockets cut in and the slamming acceleration drove the frail ship forward and upwards

into the darkening violet-blue sky.

Another man was on his way out to space.

After a seven mile climb, Apt flattened out the trajectory and opened up the throttle. He had had strict instructions *not* to watch the machmeter; he had been told to concentrate on the accelerometer and fuel gauges.

He watched the accelerometer carefully—remember, this was the first time he'd flown the X-2, or any other rocket, and the thrust was far more important than the maximum speed, which depended on the duration of thrust.

A camera peered over his shoulder, automatically recording the instruments' readings before him, whilst telemetered messages radioed back gave a second by second account of the flight. And the flight plan worked perfectly. The thrust continued to accelerate the ship, continuing for nine seconds longer than in any previous test.

At the end of the fuel—brenn-schluss—Captain Milburn Apt had broken the world's speed record. He was travelling at Mach 3.3—2,200 miles per hour. But he could never have known this.

Acting on instructions not to look at the machmeter, as soon as his fuel had been expended he radioed his base that he was about to turn.

Within six seconds he shrieked unintelligibly.

Within a few more he hit the ground.

The camera was salvaged from the wreckage and the developed film showed Captain Apt leaning

forward at that critical moment in the flight. Whether his movement was deliberate or accidental is not known—nor is it ever likely to be.

It is probable that he had not realised just how fast he was travelling—the machmeter which he was not watching was the only indication he could have had of his fantastic speed—and he began to turn at once without making any allowance for his enormous velocity.

At that tremendous speed, far beyond any previous human flight, the controls became unmanageable and the plane yawed. It skidded along still at supersonic speed.

Either Apt reached the ring releasing the pilot's capsule—the entire cockpit enclosure could be blown free—or it was cracked loose by the really vicious stresses that would be set up by the varying acceleration as the plane tried to thrust its bulk through the solid mass of air instead of knifing nose-first through it. Captain Apt, in his capsule, was blown from the madly gyrating plane. He must have been badly bruised and disoriented—at the very least—by the buffeting he received.

As he made the long drop, stabilised by the drag parachutes, he managed to recover his senses sufficiently to free himself of the canopy and release his belt. Then his personal parachute should have taken over.

But the fastest man in the world was too slow. He ran out of time.

He could not open his parachute before he made planetfall.

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NAME.....

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THE WALL

By D. WILCOX

It was a most unusual club; the members had everything they wanted for the asking. Everything, that is, but the answer to the one thing they wanted to know.

COUNCILLOR BRIGGS WAS sitting it out, irritably waiting for Winton's string of excuses to end. He was sitting on a hard chair and that helped his irritability a lot. But he wasn't really listening to Winton, anyway, because he moved in a circle of self-esteem that excluded any opinions other than his own.

"It's just that I took up too hard a job," Winton explained lamely. "The merits are bound to fall that way. Other people take up easier jobs and so it's easier for them to get the required number of merits. It's by these comparisons that I have failed, sir, not by the standard of my work."

"You know I'd laugh if this were any other place," Briggs replied. "Because in any other place this would be a big joke. Frankly, I don't care about your work. I don't care about any work, including my own, because

I just don't worry about purposes and all this idealistic stuff you've been talking about. You're welcome to your opinions, Winton, providing that mine come first."

He lit a cigar, and eased his irksome bulk on the chair. Breath wheezed plaintively in his corpulent body, and saliva began to spread out visibly on the cigar end. "You fat ox," Winton thought. "You big, fat ox."

"Life here," Briggs continued, "is just a ritual of conventions. There are rules. If anyone falls below fifty merits in their work they're tossed out on their ear. And you, Winton, are sinking to that level fast. The rules just won't stand for it." He stopped, for he was short on breath, and he was reaching the stage of his homily where he usually dragged out his Christmas cracker philosophy.

"You're a real tear jerker,

Winton," he said. "But I'll cry later in private when you're gone. Excuses are nothing, because they have nothing to do with reality. There's only a few things that really matter, and one of them happens to be success. And if you haven't got what it takes to chase the mirage of endeavour, then you'll have to look under rocks and other nasty places for what you want."

He eyed Winton viciously. "But I won't stand for mawkish self pity, do you understand? You're disturbing the peace around here telling other club members that there are no radiation areas out there. And that maybe it was time we got a new Chief Counsellor who won't smother us in taboos. Now, change your job, shut your mouth and get out. I want to hear nothing more from you, or there will be nothing of you to worry about."

He got up and subsided into a large armchair. A sigh of pleasure came from him. Winton left.

When he came into the bar Winton noticed with surprise that several acquaintances of his got up when he sat down, and with casual deliberation began to congregate at one end of the bar and discuss a topic of disdain. Which, by their covert looks, he was obviously the subject.

Winton was perturbed at this. He called over Joe, the robot

barman. Joe, as all barmen went, was the reference to all the gossip of the club.

"What will you have, Mr. Winton?" Joe asked.

"A whisky, and some information," Winton replied. And nodding over to the group, enquired: "What's with them?"

"Mr. Greaves is dead, sir," the robot replied.

An image in Winton's mind crumbled to a ruin. An image that had been Freddy Greaves. Athletic, boisterous, one of the club's most popular members, and Winton's closest friend.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"It seems that he had a small wager with those gentlemen," Joe began. "He supported your opinion that there were no radiation areas outside the club grounds. They opposed him. He said that he was going to prove it, as he had great faith in you. They tried to dissuade him, almost forcibly in fact. But they had taken his bet and could not retract with honour. So he went. And now he's back on the hot bed in the mortuary."

So now they blame me, Winton thought, for inflicting myself on a young and impressionable mind. And maybe they're right. He was the idol that had to have a sacrifice. Poor Freddy, who always drank too much. Death should have come to him in bottled instalments.

Who would have thought that his end would be so ghastly?

"Give me another drink, Joe," he said. "The one I had needs company."

"Which is more than you're going to get," an unpleasant voice remarked from behind him.

It was Davis, a witch-hunting bigot, who had surfaced from his alcoholic haze to look for a victim. He was a rabble rouser. The vocal identity of a mob that cries for justice from the haunts of evil.

"I wonder you've got the nerve to come back here, Winton," he blustered, trying to infuse a robust indignation into his bleared and dimming eyes. "Wonder you've got the nerve to face decent people." He hiccupped loudly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, spreading your lies around, and urging poor old Greaves to go out and get himself killed." He stopped for a poignant moment, having the showmanship, then, to lubricate it with a maudlin tear: "Well, I'm not going to stand for it, see," he bawled. And with that he swung a haymaker, that missed Winton and smashed into a pile of glasses that Joe was about to fill for another round.

"That will go on your bill, sir," Joe declared frigidly.

In the hubbub Winton made a quick exit. His sorrow could not extend itself beyond an immediate anguish at Greaves' death. Now he had urgent personal business to

attend to. Now he had to see Spencer the psychiatrist.

He went into the lounge, and a robot waiter carrying several drink trays paused and spoke to him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Winton. Is there anything I can get you?"

"I'd like a body like yours, Charles. Something that will resist lynching."

"Very droll, sir," the robot replied. "But I meant a drink."

"No thank you, Charles," Winton replied. "As from this moment I'm on the wagon."

"An excellent idea, sir," the robot said. "A departure from routine often helps out in our problems."

This is just great, Winton thought. Now even the servants know I'm slipping. Nervously, he went over to where in a corner the merit ticker stood. He picked up the tape and ran it through his fingers.

Names were listed there in alphabetical order. Each name bearing the current merits assessing the member's contribution to the cultural life of the club.

Williams, 93; Wharton, 88; Winton, 61.

This was his low-water mark. It had been 78 yesterday, and 90 the day before, and 101 the day before that. A year ago it had been 150.

It made a man desperate to know that if he sank to 50 he was thrown out of the club. There had never been anything in his life but

the club. There couldn't be, because there was no other way of life available.

It was the dream that was doing it, he told himself. The recurrent theme that kept coming night after night. That was why he had to see Spencer. He didn't particularly like the man, too verbose for his taste. But he had a great tolerance, that made his opinions completely impartial and objective.

He looked around and finally spotted him, parked away in an inconspicuous corner. He went over, instinctively walking on tip-toe, for silence was demanded here. Placards all around endorsed the club precept that this room was a hallowed shrine, in which noise was a heresy.

"Goodafternoon, Mr. Spencer!" he said.

"Goodafternoon, Mr. Winton!"

He was a tall, cadaverous man, dressed in a horsy country manner in dilapidated tweeds, on which he had lavishly deposited the daily stratum of ash from his perpetual cigarettes. He gave Winton a sharp, aquisitive look, and said: "Is there anything on which I can advise you?"

Winton dithered for a moment. Then he said: "Are you an expert at interpreting dreams?"

"Dreams?" Spencer said. "The ones induced by alcohol perhaps? Or the ordinary domestic hazards of the bed?"

"This is serious," Winton said.

"Even so. Is humour to rely so often on the pathetic?"

"This dream is about death. Not the kind that's found on the edge of a blade, but a kind of spiritual death."

"You need a priest."

"I need you. I need a logical explanation. You see, in this dream there are shadows for which there are no people. And spectres that have no human designations. They rise and fall, like phantoms lifted by candlelight. Night is their clime and day their despondency. I walk among them, across a field deepwithgrass. And then, suddenly, I can see before me tall buildings, incredibly lustrous. They shimmer, mobile with strange shapes, and grow no larger as I get closer to them. And then I realise that I cannot get closer to them because I am slipping. Sideways, out of equilibrium. I try to fix my eyes upon a point in front of me and struggle towards it. But it is useless. Always I am forced out at a tangent.

"It is like a wall of energy, with a great intolerance field that rejects human proximity. I cannot physically overcome it, or mentally remain calm in its presence. It is the ultimate of something, before which I can only turn and run."

Spencer was silent for a moment. Then he said: "From your urgent manner I had expected something novel and original. You say that

this is a dream. I say it is a fact. I believe you because I have experienced it myself. Although it would be treason to publicly admit it. National shame is something that must be kept in the reticence of honour. Most of the members here have had this dream, but no one is permitted to loosely discuss the subject. Or venture to prove it for themselves."

"But every night it haunts me," Winton cried. "Challenging me to go out and seek the mystery that holds me in bondage. It's an obsession with me, affecting my work. Do you know that my merits are falling every day because of it? I must go out and find it."

"For what reason?" Spencer asked him. "To give your dreams a substance that would in no way erase an enigma? These words have I spoken to men before you. They did not listen to me, and went out to find the wall. They were brought back. Dead."

"Then there are radiation areas?" Winton said.

Spencer shrugged. "That is the official excuse for restricting our activities," he replied. "Actually, the security guards went out after those men and killed them. An illusion must be maintained that we are still free.

"However," he continued, "there is no solution to your problem in your knowing that the wall exists. What your need

is now is to live with that knowledge, and accept the fact that there are certain things that you cannot prove for yourself. That is the only hope for you."

Winton sighed at this, for he was not convinced that this attitude would function. There were hazards in being an ostrich. To dig a hole was to find yourself sometimes at the bottom of it.

"What did Briggs say about your low marks?" Spencer asked him.

"So you know about that," Winton said. "Well he gave me the storm warning. I've got to put a spark in it. You know, I'd like to kick his fat butt over a fence."

"We'll share the honours of the boot," Spencer grinned. "But, meanwhile, I am considering the possibility that your work isn't sufficiently creative. What work is it that you do at the moment?"

"I study garden history with a new type of retrograde viewer," Winton replied.

"Oh, that must be interesting?"

"Yes, it is. I trace the history of one small plot of ground, backwards you know. Hour by hour, day by day. I study events that happened long ago. Naturally, I cannot go farther back than the human revelation time of five decades. Memory ends there."

"Of course," Spencer replied. "And do not try to go further back. The Council forbids undue

deliberation on the subject. But," he added, "I must confess that I find this work of yours most intriguing. I've never heard of anyone ever doing it before."

"Well everything here is just play acting, isn't it?" Winton replied. "What I mean is that there is no driving purpose behind it all."

"There you go again. Surely there is fulfilment in keeping the mind occupied, however trivial a subject may seem?"

"Why is that?" Winton asked him vehemently. "Look at everyone here. They're not interested in what they do. They are just obliged to do it in order to be retained in a system that can exact from them the supreme penalty for disobedience. It's this fear of something intangible that makes us erect a set of silly rules to live by. It's a society of artificial vocations, none of them having any productive assets."

Spencer looked around nervously. "Don't talk so loud," he whispered. "Do you want us both bounced out of here?"

Winton gestured despairingly. "Well, I ask you, is there any meaning behind it all? Now take, for instance, the distribution of commodities. Why is it that whenever we want money we can go to a bank and get all we need? The clothes we wear are made by members here who like making clothes. It's the same with preci-

sion tools. They don't have to do it, because the stuff would be there anyway, whether they made it or not. Everything that's made here is just ornamental. There's just no regenerating intent in anything."

"We are the heirs of Earth," Spencer explained. "We are the reason for generations of forgotten pain and sorrow. We live for pleasurable pursuits, because it is our birthright."

"But where does all this stuff that we use come from?" Winton persisted. "Before there were shirts on our backs there had to be cotton in the fields. And metal in the earth before we had precision tools. But who smelted that ore, who grew that cotton?"

"Shut up!" Spencer cried savagely. "What is this, a divine appraisal? Who gave you the authority to question the modes and customs of our times? One accepts the bounty without question. Who judges the intention behind a gift? We take what is given, it is easier that way."

"But what has been taken from us in return?" Winton asked him. "Human memory goes back five decades, but you're older than that. What were you before the mists of time came to blot out the past? Where is our heritage of tradition that must be ours? Look in the library, and you will find no record of it there. All these things are expressions of defeat, the

source of which goes back eventually to the wall. The wall is the perimeter of a prison, in which we are kept. Like a reservation preserving the last of a species."

"A plausible theory, but it happens to be wrong," Spencer replied. "Wrong, simply because you are unable to prove it right. Now, must I repeat myself? Let well alone. I've been thinking again that maybe your obsession is due to your work not being sufficiently absorbing? Or perhaps it is too hard for you?"

"I don't think so," Winton replied.

"There are some here who prefer to do something not quite so ambitious," Spencer said. "It is easier to qualify for merits that way. For instance, there are studies on such subjects as furniture and eating habits. Or tracing the evolution of kitchen utensils."

"That is very superficial," Winton remarked.

"But by such an attitude is life suspended," Spencer replied. "Now, I want to know what you're going to do about the problem?"

"Nothing!" Winton said. "I'm going to sleep on it, and hope that, eventually, it will work itself out."

"It'll work itself out all right, to the final exit," Spencer replied. "And take you with it. Don't bury yourself in integrity. It's a possession of poverty that lives in attics. One must compromise with mediocrity."

"I'll live it out!"

"You do that. Keep the safety catches on everything, and justify your death with martyrdom. Now beat it, you're a hopeless case. I'm old and I'm tired, and sleep is an escape from so many things."

Winton left him to his sleep and went his own way. But nothing interested him any more. Studying the antics of long-dead creatures and the optimum conditions of the soil now seemed completely trivial before the mystery of the wall. That rose up before him, vast and immutable, each night. The end was inevitable. His marks dropped below 50, and he was summoned with a deathly finality before Counsellor Briggs.

"There must always be a jester, against whom all others appear fine and noble," Briggs remarked, looking at Winton with sere and caustic eyes. "The stupid are among us. The self-inspired fools who must upset apple carts and tear down emblems of proven worth. I like the wisdom of silence, Winton. And I've heard that you've been saying that we all live in a reservation, kept by creatures whose physical descriptions inhabit only an imagination such as yours. Well I'm . . ."

"I said nothing of the sort," Winton interrupted. "What I did say was that I believe a wall exists, behind which we are kept

as prisoners. I mentioned nothing about creatures."

"I merely anticipated a stage of your delusion," Briggs replied. "You will not be alive to prove me wrong."

He lit a cigar and sat thinking for a while. He seemed to be perturbed about something.

"Supposing I admitted to you that there is a wall," he said. "I have opinions about it the same as you. But what do you suppose we could do about it?"

"I want to do nothing about it. I just want to keep it out of my mind," Winton explained wearily.

"Yes, I've heard about your dreams," Briggs admitted. "Maybe I've been too harsh on you at that. Now this wall, it's all so simple, really. It's to keep things out, not to keep us in. The loss of memory is a blockage to keep us satisfied with things as they are. Remembering too much of the world might make us want to go out to it and get it back again. And if I dissolved the wall something terrible might happen."

"You mean that you can get rid of it?" Winton asked him.

Briggs appeared to regret his indiscretion. "Yes, I can," he admitted. "It's all in that control panel there."

The panel was on a wall, and looking at it made Winton thrill with curiosity. Just a slight pull on that switch, he thought, and a new epoch would be ushered in.

It gave him a feeling of power that was almost profane to know that his hand was the custodian of a vast storied expanse of time. That would rush to reality beneath his touch. His hand would imprint itself on posterity. And then an irresistible impulse made him rush forward. And it was done. He had pulled the switch.

Briggs looked at the control panel with a stupefied expression on his face. As if willing it to return to its former function. Then he rose unsteadily, choking with the frenzy of futile words.

"You ruddy Adam!" he bawled. "What have you done? My memory is coming back, and with it destruction. For now they can see us. Now they know what we are doing."

"Who are they?" Winton asked him. "My creatures? Or perhaps the whimsical menagerie of an alcoholic? You're dreaming. There's nothing out there."

Briggs groaned and slumped into his chair. "What's the use," he said hopelessly. "We had everything we wanted here, and now it's all gone. Don't you remember now when they came down out of the sky? And we the only survivors had to hide behind the wall? And create this barrier that removed our memories so that never would they know the stigma of that horrible day?"

A faint sheen of perspiration showed on Winton's face. A

truth was becoming unpleasantly apparent to him. He shuddered suddenly, and jerked the lever back.

"Perhaps they're still out there?" he whispered.

"If we get out of this I'm going to nail your hide up in my trophy room," Briggs said angrily.

They sat waiting nervously until day had darkened down to twilight.

"Maybe there's nothing outside any more," Winton remarked. "Perhaps we've been left here, sealed up like an old bottle in a forgotten corner."

"Nothing is ever forgotten," Briggs replied. "The knowledge of the world has come back to us. And, with it, the presence of death, and the primæval fear that erects superstitions to explain and placate it. The things out there

may have gone. But what made them go?"

"A civilization, over elaborate with glib explanations, that made death and fear seem futile," Winton suggested. "Who knows? The meaning goes, and another meaning must take its place or there is no survival."

"That's it!" Briggs said, triumphantly. "That's what came back to us from the outside. The challenge from the unknown, telling us that we have lost the meaning here. And that we must go outside to find something new. One cannot ignore the prospect of the unknown, whatever the dangers. For that is the supreme refutation of faith. For don't you see what came back to us? It is so simple. It is the spirit of adventure."



THE HUMAN SEED

By G. W. LOCKE

Harper wasn't a cat but he was curious just the same—and curiosity, as every cat knows, can quite often be rather permanently lethal.

THEY HAD BEEN TRADING FOR only a week when Jones became aware of his partner's concentration on the tree. Admittedly, it was a highly unusual growth, and Harper, a former botanist, might be expected to have an interest in it; but it seemed to be occupying the whole of his mind.

"Arthur. What's the matter with you? You just let one of those natives get away with twice as much alcohol for that load of furs as he should have. They were lousy!"

Harper, standing by the window, took no notice. Jones agitated: "You didn't even hear me! What's eating you?"

"Nothing. I'm just studying the tree. It intrigues me, Harry. It's unique."

"It's just a tree." Jones shrugged. "A thing with branches. Stubby, short branches. Thin stem. Fairly tall . . ."

"*Fairly*, he says! It's only two thousand feet tall!"

"... has a few leaves on the branches. Cup-shaped object at the top, which you tell me's a seed pod." He laughed, cynically.

"It's not growing tentacles and eating babies, so why worry?"

Harper remained silent. He could think of nothing to say which would shake Harry out of his disinterest. He supposed it was due to the man's lack of scientific training, coupled with the fact that the tree failed to stimulate a very ordinary imagination. To himself, the tree posed as one of the unsolved mysteries of the universe. As far as he had been able to find out, from the telepathic natives of Larneen, there was only this one specimen on the whole world. Nor, he had gathered, had there ever been more.

A native carrying a bundle of furs knocked once, entered. Harper turned to deal with him, but Jones held him back. "I'll do it. Try and win back some of your losses." Harper grinned sheepishly.

In spite of the fact that the majority of their customers were regulars—hunters' representatives—the two Earthmen were only slowly beginning to distinguish between the natives. Their lack of ears and eyes, for a start, made identification very difficult.

"Name?" asked Jones.

"Zarn," the native replied, his telepathy making it sound perfect English.

"You've brought us a lot today. Hunting good?"

Silently, Zarn laid out the furs for Jones to examine, turning them over as the trader directed. "Yes, the conditions in the forest have been perfect. The 'furry lizards' are sluggish in the hot sun. Even I, long past the age for strenuous activities, joined the hunt and caught a brace." He reached into a separate pack, displayed two silvery furs, scintillating in the bright rays of the sun streaming through the window.

Jones completed the examination. "An excellent lot, on the whole. I can allow you three hundred Terran credits' worth of goods from our store, another ten for your own two skins, and two litres of alcohol."

Zarn thanked him, turning to go. Jones restrained him. "There's no hurry. That lot was really good. Have a drink with us."

Harper turned from the window at last, joined them. It was mid-afternoon, several hours before sundown, and the rush. Zarn had been early with his goods.

"Forget that tree, Arthur," Jones said presently. He paused, wondering how he could argue his partner out of his obsession. Harper was staring at the brown

liquid in his glass. "Thinking?" Harry Jones murmured, gently.

Harper nodded, robot-like.

"About the tree?" Jones had decided to handle the subject as a father might.

"I'm wondering what the Larneens use it for. The field it's in is not cultivated, like all the others. And have you noticed that footpath leading right up to it? Why?"

Jones shrugged.

"Perhaps there's some religious significance to it," Harper pursued the topic. "It's enough of a natural marvel for the natives to use it as some kind of altar, maybe. Or . . ."

"We don't *know* it's a religious symbol, though. Look, it'd be simpler if you asked our friend Zarn instead of theorising."

The alien hadn't heard the conversation—telepathy of communication was directed and extraneous minds were unable to pick it up—but on Harper's spoken question reaching his mind, Zarn's face saddened.

"We use the tree by which to die," he said, then stopped abruptly. Harper and Jones stared at each other. Jones nodded.

"I suppose they climb to the top and jump off," he assumed. "But why do they kill themselves?"

"The Larneens are an alien culture. Earthmen have not known the planet for long, and I don't think an extensive survey of the people has been made by any

scientific body." Harper sounded like a text-book. "Therefore, how can we say what odd turns their culture will take?"

"So maybe they commit suicide when they become too old for life to be worth while?"

Harper didn't answer, but repeated Jones' question to the alien.

Zarn's "voice" was even sadder. "When we feel old, there comes a time when we feel the urge to die. No longer is there any fun in life. No longer can we work as the younger ones do. So, when the time comes, we climb the tree, experience the ultimate thrill, and die. I will climb the tree tomorrow."

The two traders fell silent, embarrassed by Zarn's last sentence. The Larneen dropped his head to the table for a weary moment, then sipped at his whisky. "I've had a good life," his telepathed thoughts came as whispers. "A very good life. I shouldn't complain. But sometimes I wish our people were immortal, never grew old . . ."

Jones poured him out some more whisky.

". . . I felt the urge come this afternoon, as I was trapping the second furry lizard. Immediately, I came to your trading post . . . don't give me any more whisky. Why waste it on one who will die?"

The traders didn't know what to say.

It was evening, and the last rays of the sun were sneaking behind the horizon. Trading had finished for the day, and Harper had managed to persuade Jones to accompany him to the base of the tree. Jones looked bored.

The former botanist slapped the extra-ordinarily thin trunk. "What do *you* make of those two ridges running up the stem, one on each side?"

Jones felt them, shook his head.

"Do you see the way they spiral, as they climb up the trunk? And those little curlicues in their spiralling?"

Jones nodded. "So?"

"And the trunk, straight as a die? What keeps it up? What holds those two thousand feet of trunk erect?"

"The spirals?" Jones guessed.

"They must do." Harper tried to dig into one of the keels with his knife, but the blade didn't even scratch it. "They're the hardest plant organs I've ever come across. But what I can't make out is why they are the shape they are. Every curl and spiral only weakens the structure."

Jones was still bored. He grunted.

"And another thing. The capsule at the top. I suppose it once held seeds. But if it did, and it has shed those seeds, where are

the young trees? There should be a forest of trees round this one. But there's not a trace of one." There *was* a forest, but several miles away, and composed of quite ordinary plants.

"The natives said there weren't any others." Jones had to say something; he hated lectures and monologues.

"Precisely." Harper leapt. "Where did the seeds go, then?"

"Maybe the seeds haven't gone yet. I mean, maybe the tree hasn't seeded yet."

Harper shook his head. "I was looking at the capsule through some glasses. It's old and shrivelled, as dead as a door nail."

"Then?"

Harper gazed up at the tree, followed the line of the rows of short, ladder-rung-like branches from the base to the capsule. They were in leaf. For a long while, he was silent, then he said: "There's something about this tree. Something . . . I dunno what."

Jones lost his patience. "So what? What the hell does it matter? Why don't you grow up?"

They returned to the trading post.

Breakfast the next morning was a little strained. Jones realised he had lost his temper the night before when he shouldn't have done. He had been over-harsh with regard to his partner's hobby-horse. After all, why shouldn't the

man show some interest in subjects outside his business?

Truth to tell, the inconsistencies of the tree had been nagging at him during the night, and he had been getting little sleep. One thing worried him, for some unknown reason: Somewhere, sometime, he had seen a similar pattern to that of the spiral keels on the tree's trunk. Somewhere . . .

Where?

Harper was looking out of the window anxiously. Jones noticed his expression. "What is it?"

"Two thousand feet is a long way to drop. There must be some signs of a man striking the ground. Spots of blood. Smashed flesh. But I didn't see a sign of anything. Damn it! We should have asked Zarn more questions. There's such a lot which doesn't fit in."

A Larneen walked past outside the window. Harper suddenly jumped to his feet, ran to the open window, called. The native turned. "Yes?"

"Where can I find Zarn?"

"Zarn partook of the ultimate thrill at dawn. He is now dead. Can I help you?" The native hovered, on the point of continuing his way.

Harper let him go. He seemed to have a severe phobia against asking the natives any number of questions. Jones reckoned that was due to his—being a scientist—superiority complex over the natives. It must be. Otherwise,

the guy would be asking them questions all day long. He wouldn't stop until he had every bit of information, useful or otherwise, about that tree.

He snorted. Harper was no scientist. *He* wanted to form his theories, make his discoveries, without any facts at all. Why, that last bit: "The ultimate thrill at dawn," he'd try to analyse without asking the native what it meant. "To hell with it!" he snorted. "It's his pigeon."

That evening it got worse. If Jones hadn't known there were no such phenomena as psychic influences, he would have thought the botanist was held in possession by the tree. To get his mind off the tree, Jones decided to talk about some scientific topic. Any scientific topic.

"How do those natives see?" They didn't have eyes, yet they didn't act blind.

"Extra-sensory perception. They're telepathic, and ESP powers are akin to telepathy."

"So the natives have ESP?"

Harper nodded.

"I've heard about ESP before. Do many races in the universe possess it?"

Harper nodded.

"What is ESP?"

Jones sighed. A week ago his partner would have been only too eager to discuss any scientific subject with him.

"About those spirals," Jones

tried again. "Why do you think they are that shape?"

Harper nodded. Jones practically screamed. The guy was going mad. That tree was sending him crazy.

"Arthur," he said slowly. "To-day you've been all wrong, have hardly spoken a word. What's the matter? You let the natives get away with blue murder—no, don't worry about it. We've got plenty of profit. We can stand it. What's on your mind?" Silence. "You know, you're driving yourself crazy. Is there something you don't understand about the tree?" He didn't suggest that he talk to the natives; Harper was beyond that. "What is it? The spirals? The capsule? The lack of seedlings around?"

Harper looked up at him. A light suddenly glowed in his eye. "I'm all right. I was thinking how cool it must be at the top of the tree."

Jones saw it. Some men, particularly the more learned, suffered from frustration. Frequently, the frustration was something which couldn't be pinned down. On other occasions it could. Harper's was probably a sense of having failed a certain physical achievement, at some time in his youth. Most likely, having failed to climb a mountain. If he were to climb that tree, the sense of achievement resulting would probably cure him.

"Tomorrow, I'll climb the tree," the botanist suddenly said, almost in reply to Jones' thoughts. "Tomorrow." -

The atmosphere relaxed. After a while, they played a short game of cards and then went to bed.

Jones woke up after a nightmare in which spirals chased keels around curlicues, to find Harper's bed empty. Dressing hurriedly, he crossed to the window. A squat figure was climbing the tree, a minute fly against the blue of the early morning. He was about a hundred feet up—and wearing a spacesuit.

Jones took a sub-wave walkie-talkie out of the equipment room, hastily set up the aerial. Running towards the tree, he stopped when he was about a quarter of a mile from the bole. By this time Harper was halfway up the trunk, which was swaying slightly.

His weight, or the wind?

"Arthur," Jones transmitted, "are you receiving me?"

"Sure, chum; loud and clear." Harper's voice was cheerful, fresh, changed from the moodiness of the previous night.

"What you wearing that thing for? It must weigh half a ton on your back."

Harper chuckled, said nothing.

"You said yesterday you wanted to feel the cool breeze of two thousand feet of altitude. Then why the suit?" Jones persisted.

He didn't like the chuckle in his voice. When scientists go in for something they don't use half measures.

The chuckle repeated itself. "Wait and see." Three quarters of the way up. The tree was definitely swaying now.

Jones yelled with fear. "It'll never stand your weight! Come down! Come down before you kill yourself!"

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. I'll be all right."

By the time Harper reached the capsule, the tree was wobbling like a jelly in the gentle wind.

"You're up there. You've seen the scenery. Now come down, nut."

Harper didn't seem to have heard. "You know, I'm going to have some fun in a minute. I haven't swung on a swing since I was a kid."

"You're crazy."

"No, I'm not. I know what I'm doing." Jones wasn't so sure, but he listened. He had no choice. "Yesterday morning, although I didn't tell you, I watched Zarn die. At least, I saw what probably meant his death. To make sure, I asked one of the natives later where Zarn had gone. The man said he *had* died. I never saw Zarn die, as I said. I only saw the *manner* of his dying. *You'll* see that, too, in a minute. Wait a moment, while I start this damned thing swinging."

There was radio silence for a minute, and then Jones saw the tip of the tree begin to swing from side to side. With each revolution, the sweep of the swing increased.

"I've worked out how this tree seeds itself. You see, the clue lies in these spiral keels. When the seed in the capsule reaches a certain size and weight, when it's ripe, it acts somehow on those keels, setting the tree swinging at the same time. When the tree swings . . . Look, I want you to do me a favour. I'll keep this radio sending on sub-wave, and when I disappear, I want you to take the ship and find me again. I'll be somewhere in space, where the tree will have thrown me."

Harper's explanation had been all over the place. Jones had difficulty following it. He inferred, however, that the tree, by means of the keels, flung its seeds out into space, and that Harper wanted to follow them. But?

"Arthur, can you stop the thing? Do you know how much energy it takes for a spaceship to take off a planet? Well, the tree isn't a rocket. It's a catapult. And the acceleration it would have to supply a body to enable it to reach escape velocity must be terrific. You'd never stand up to it; you'll be squashed to a pulp. Stop the tree, before it's too late."

The tree was swinging strongly now, and there seemed to be a twist to its motion. Those keels . . .

"No, Harry. I don't think the acceleration will be very great. I thought about that. A seed is a very delicate structure, and if a considerable accelerational force was applied to one, it is certain to be damaged."

"In that case, how would it escape from this planet? It must reach escape velocity to get away, and it can't do that without reaching one God-awful acceleration!"

Harper laughed. "See the tree twist as it swings? It's this twist which, by the way, provides the natives who commit suicide with the final thrill of their life: the ultimate thrill. I can tell you it's a wonderful feeling. Wish you were here. But I haven't finished explaining yet. I climbed the tree in a spacesuit so that I wouldn't die of oxygen lack when I was flung into space. I climbed it for the thrill involved. And I won't be killed by the acceleration for one simple reason. What does the configuration of the keels remind you of? It is exactly the same pattern as that of the space-elements of the hyper-drive of our ship. The tree doesn't work up enormous amounts of energy to fling a seed into space; it twists it into hyper-space, which isn't dependent on overcoming gravity for its success. The tree has a built-in hyper-space drive. So you might have a long trip to find me. I'll leave the sub-wave

on for you, though, so you won't have to look far when I return to normal space. That's the only bit I haven't figured out. How do I return to normal space?" Jones could imagine Harper's shrug. "I expect it's a controlled twisting, and pretty weak. Enough to let its seed stay in hyper-space long enough to get out of the gravitational attraction of this world. So you won't have to look far for me."

Jones, listening, hadn't noticed the increase of the tree's swing. Fascinated by its snake-like twistings, he watched it, with Harper's voice droning in the background. Harper's monologue had turned philosophical once more. "... Be a seed. Floating through space to another world, to become a tree on an alien planet ..."

The swinging tree was almost touching the capsule to the ground. It was a miracle that Harper was able to hang on. A certain whip-like quality was developing, as the capsule skimmed the grass.

"... I can feel the whole trunk twisting under me. Writhing as though it wants to throw me away. Writhing in agony ... Sometimes, I can see the sky flashing past, sometimes the grass skimming the capsule, brushing the helmet of my suit ... And the acceleration as the capsule leaves the ground to climb into the heights again. Terrible. But the weightlessness at the top ... Wonderful!

"Whoops. My stomach nearly split apart, then. I guess it's coming soon. Very soon. It feels just like pre-transition when the drive is turned on. It'll only be seconds, now ..."

There was one final twist, with the capsule near the apex of its climb, and then the tree was still. Still, as though it had not moved.

Jones listened for Harper's radio voice. Presently it came, faint. Sub-wave impulses are carried through hyper-space, but only faintly.

"The wrenching has gone. I'm floating. I can't feel a thing. It's hyper-space, no doubt of it. Wonder where I am right now? Hope it's near Larneen. I don't want to wait days for you to pick me up.

"The blackness of hyper-space is vanishing. I wasn't inside long. Another blackness is appearing. Soon I'll be able to see stars ...

"Stars. I can't see one. That's funny. Blackness is all I see ... There's one heck of a weight pressing down on me. Onto the suit. I can't breathe, it's so strong ... I can't breathe, the weight is too heavy. Can't talk ..."

Harper had failed to consider one thing: The tree did not waste its time or its seed's chances by depositing the seed into space, to drift. It made sure of its offspring's survival by planting it on another planet. In the soil. Deep within the crushing soil ...

ROLLING STONE

By ROBERT J. TILLEY

It was an odd form of life but not all that unusual. The desire for vengeance is not unknown to the human race and neither is mimicry. It was just that the stone had both in somewhat unusual proportions

A SUPERSTITIOUS NATURE coupled with archaic fears," sneered Ward. "Hardly suitable qualifications for a man in your position, Harry." Ward was tall, fleshy, with impatient hands and eyes. He swept his gaze around the surrounding men and machinery before concentrating it on the engineer at his side.

"How many of your boys have the same ideas on the subject?"

Huxley said: "I think we'd better keep this personal, Mr. Ward." He picked his words carefully. "It was my decision to hold up operations and any blame incurred is my responsibility." He moved his feet, awkwardly. "In any case, I didn't make it due to any persuasion from inside the camp."

"No?" said Ward. His voice was derisive, his eyes contemptuous. "You're trying to tell me a pack of those tom-fool natives

twisted your arm with one of their tall tales? Harry, you're a civilized educated man, and I hired you to behave like one. If you're going to handle a project like this, then it's going to be handled the way you're told. No pampering to a bunch of three-toed midgets with tails, and faces that don't need any make up to double for Frankenstein." He grinned, but his eyes were still cold. "Harry, I hired you because you're good and I figured you as the right man for the job. But this is the biggest deal we've handled yet, and we're working to a budget and a deadline. If we let them down you know what happens. Other outfits are crowding the Government night and day—Interplanetary Developments almost sneaked this one from right under our noses, and it took hard talk and hard money in the right place to swing it our way. If we fumble, we're out in

the cold and, mister, it's cold out there. We'd fold like an empty paper bag." His eyes bored into Huxley. "And that means you, too, Harry."

Huxley's mouth was thin, stubborn.

Ward said: "I want to know what this is all about." He spun on his heel, and jerked his head towards one of the cluster of huts. "Let's get over to the office. There's a bottle in my brief-case. Maybe a drink will loosen you up a little." He jerked his head again impatiently. Huxley shrugged, followed him.

Inside the hut, Ward reached the bottle of whisky from his brief-case, selected two glasses from the wall cupboard and poured generously into both. He set one in front of Huxley, cupped the other between his hands and sat at ease in one of the chairs by the folding metal table. He said nothing, waiting.

"It was early this morning," Huxley said at last. He sighed after this opening, raised his glass, tipped his head backwards and swallowed hard. He nursed the empty glass, looking fixedly at the toes of his boots stretched out in front of him. "I wasn't sleeping so well, so I thought I'd get up and prow around for a bit of air. It's always fresher before we start kicking up a dust and I've had my stomachful the past day or so."

Ward said nothing. His eyes were intent on Huxley.

"I heard something stir over by the explosives shed. Thought it would only be a bimbo, but I went over to check, anyway."

"Bimbo?"

"Kind of a mole cum large rat we get hanging around. Camp-followers. They're harmless, but they've made a mess of the stores before now. Anyway." Huxley crossed his feet, moved in his chair. "It was three natives, one of them a senior exec of some standing, going by his decorations. I asked them what they were after, and they told me. They wanted to see head man. Since you hadn't arrived, that made me it." Huxley reached for the bottle, poured himself another drink and sat back.

"Help yourself," said Ward. His voice was placid but his eyes were unfriendly.

"They wanted to know if we were planning on opening up the north valley. I told them yes, we were, today. Created quite a stir." Huxley drained his glass again, held it up to the light, pursed his lips in a surprised way and methodically poured himself another drink.

Ward said nothing.

Huxley said: "It's about the moving stones."

"What?"

"The moving stones. That's what had them jumping." Huxley

grimaced, swallowed half the contents of his glass and lifted his shoulders in a half-shrug, half-shudder.

Ward snorted sharply through his nose.

"Mister, that's what we're here for, to move stones. So far we've moved a few billion and no questions have been asked. What's the sudden panic about? What are they after? Bigger compensation? Maybe they figure they're in a position to parley because we decided on a short-cut. What are we supposed to be doing, digging up one of their graveyards? This area has been checked, counter-checked, and double counter-checked to make absolutely sure that no mistakes of that kind can happen." Ward was furious and showed it. "By clearing that landslide at the mouth of the valley, we're clearing eight miles off the planned route and trimming our schedule by two weeks."

Huxley said: "It's not a landslide."

Ward's hand was raised, palm down, above the table, and his head was shaking firmly side to side. The hand stayed suspended momentarily, before he lowered it to the table. He pointed his chin at Huxley. His voice lost its brassy tone.

"What do you mean?"

"It's not a landslide," Huxley said again. He was topping up his

glass as he spoke. "You sidetracked a couple of minutes back. I wasn't talking about the stones that *we* move." He eyed Ward over the top of his glass. "I meant the ones that truck around under their own steam."

Ward said nothing for a full ten seconds. He snorted, less decisively, through his nose before he spoke. "Tell me the tale, Harry."

"That's what I said to them, or something like it." For the first time in the conversation, Huxley's face betrayed the faint ghost of a smile. "So they told me." He reached for the bottle once more. Ward paid no attention to its diminishing contents.

"It appears that this area has a speciality all its own. A geological freak that would interest a biologist. It looks like a rock, feels like a rock, and would probably taste like a rock if you could get somebody to chew it for you. The only thing is, it isn't a rock."

"No?"

"No. It's a nameless thing as far as we're concerned, just another of God's little wonders. To the natives, it's something to be left strictly alone—a situation that's founded solidly on the fact that, except for one memorable occasion, it leaves them alone." He looked at Ward, unsmiling.

Ward said, raspingly: "Harry,

on top of your shoulders is something that looks like a head, most probably feels like a head, and would likely taste like a head if I could get somebody to chew it for me, but is undoubtedly solid rock." His voice simmered. "I've been handed a load of bushwah in my time, but for sheer . . ."

Huxley said: "This one happens to be true." His voice and eyes were cold, contrasting with the heat in Ward's own. "I'm not the superstitious dumb brick you take me for. I played along, asked them why they had to be left alone. So they told me."

He filled his glass again. The bottle, nearly empty, shook slightly in his hand, but his voice was steady.

"Some years back, a tribe was passing through this part, headed north for the summer hunting. A couple of them were sick, had to rest up. There was no shelter around here, so the rest of the party had to make one for them. They decided to camp in the valley—there's no trees there, but it was more sheltered than any of the surrounding country and there were rocks. They were all too big, so the healthy ones set about breaking them up to size. They built a hut."

Ward was silent, listening grimly.

"They put the two sick ones inside, then settled down for the

night, out in the open. In the early hours of the morning one of the sick ones woke up. Something had disturbed him." Huxley bit his lip. "It turned out to be partly the sudden glare of the moon that did it."

"Maybe the hut had fallen down," suggested Ward. His sarcasm was biting and apparent.

Huxley said: "Not quite. The walls were going, but they weren't falling. As the fellow on the floor woke up, he saw the rest of them disappear, too. The stones took off and floated across the clearing. There was a series of dull, rather unpleasant thumps over where the rest of the party was sleeping. The other sick one was awake by now, roused by the sounds. Together, they watched the hut float or roll away, stone by stone, until they were left in an open clearing. They were sick, but they could walk. So they walked, away from all those bodies with the pulped heads, and headed back to their village to tell the story. They went unmolested."

"Sick men have hallucinations," said Ward drily.

"They do," said Huxley. "But not these. They found the usual doubting Johnnies among their own people, so they took them back there to see. They saw, and they believed. They buried their dead, away from the valley, and then stayed away. No native . . ."

"And *you* believed."

Huxley said: "You still under-rate me. This could have been the daddy of all tall-stories and I told them so." He was huddled in his chair, and Ward was suddenly conscious of the pinched coldness of his face. He eyed him curiously. "There's a cluster of small rocks up near the draw, just west of the valley mouth. They took me there. They were scared sick, but they did it. One of them hauled off with his axe and chipped one, very lightly. Just a nick on the side. It didn't go for him, but it slithered out of where it was bedded and flattened down, like it was crouching."

Ward said, explosively: "Oh, for God's sake——"

Sweat gleamed on Huxley's face and between his open collar. "The guy who did the chipping was off like a streak and the other two with him. I stayed because I was so damn scared I couldn't lift my feet." One of his eyelids twitched and a muscle worked furiously at the corner of his jaw. "And here's the spot where you laugh me out of the camp. It had no eyes, but it lay there, staring at me."

Ward said, softly: "Harry——"

Huxley looked at him. His face was puckered, childlike.

"No eyes." His nostrils were flared and his breathing agitated. "Don't you understand? It didn't have to have eyes. No arms, no legs, so why no eyes? But I could

feel that stare drilling through me, soaking up my spine . . ." His voice tailed off, choked.

Ward said: "And then it vanished, you woke up, and you were right back in your bunk where it all started." His voice was suddenly calm, reasoning. "Harry, you've been on the job a long time. A man tires."

Huxley said, slowly: "It didn't vanish. Not quite. It shrank. Fast, too. It shrank right down until where there'd been a rock the size of a man's head, there was just a pebble. No bigger than my thumb. A nice, round little pebble, the kind a kid would pick up and spin over the water at the sea side." He squeezed his eyes shut tight, ducked his head and pressed a flat palm hard against his forehead. "But all the money you could give me wouldn't have made me touch it. Not all the money in the world."

His head stayed down, the palm squeezed tightly against his gleaming forehead. Ward said nothing for nearly a minute. His eyes were suddenly compassionate.

"Harry, go to your hut and go to bed. You're just about as beat as you could be . . ."

Huxley shook his bent head, dumbly.

"You're beat," said Ward, and a touch of the hardness was back in his voice. "Go to your bunk and I'll have the medic right over to give you a shot. You're in no

state to go out on the job today. Take it gently for a couple of days, and then we'll decide what's best for you." He pulled back a cuff with his forefinger and glanced at his watch, rose to his feet. Huxley stayed motionless in his chair.

Ward said: "O.K., then. Stay where you are, and I'll get him to come in to you here. My rocket leaves in just under two hours and I can't miss it. Rest easy."

He clapped a hand on Huxley's shoulder and left the hut.

A knot of men stood, smoking, in the centre of the compound. Muttering voices broke off as Ward approached. He said: "Where's Keiler?"

One of the men broke away from the party, stepped forward. "Mr. Ward?"

"Huxley's sick," said Ward. He eyed Keiler, broodingly, for a moment. "How near ready are you to start blasting?"

Keiler said: "Well, Mr. Ward . . ." His voice was nervous. "We were just about set when Harry gave the word to hold everything. 'Til he'd had a word with you." He scuffed at the ground with his boot. His eyes refused to meet Ward's. "Did he tell you yet?"

"Tell me?" There was ice in Ward's voice.

Keiler scuffed, harder.

"Well, Mr. Ward, it was about the rocks, so he told me, he wanted to talk about . . ."

"The rocks," said Ward. Sudden fury burned his face to a dull red. His hands made white-knuckled fists at his sides. His eyes burned at the silent handful of men, raking them, one by one. "How many more of you?"

"Mr. Ward . . ."

"How many more of you big, brave space engineers are scared of a handful of dead mineral? For God's sake, don't any of you boobies know when you're having your big, knee-knocking legs pulled 'til they creak?" He rounded on Keiler, almost spitting in his face. "Are the charges planted?"

"Mr. Ward, Harry's no knucklehead. He's not the only . . ."

"The charges!" bellowed Ward. His nostrils were white. "Are the charges planted?" Spittle washed across the bridge of Keiler's nose. "If those damn charges . . ."

Keiler smeared a hand across his face. "They're set."

"Then *fire* them, damn you! Now! Right this stinking minute, or . . ."

"Fire them yourself," said Keiler. He looked sick, but his voice was steady. "I'm through. We had no right coming this way in the first place. The government don't know about it, the natives advised against it, and now we know why. Harry's right, I'm right, and you're wrong. If those

rocks go up, you're killing something, and I want no part of it. Go dirty your own hands." He turned and walked towards the huts.

Ward grabbed a man by the sleeve. "Are the charges wired?" "Sir?"

Ward spun him round viciously. "The charges!"

"Right there," said the man. He pointed to where an engineer knelt by a push-button detonation unit, tugging at something concealed by his crouching body.

Ward charged across the compound, laid his hands on his shoulders. "One side." He saw the clutching fingers snap open, away from the trailing wires. He shoved the man aside. "You're fired. Keep away." He knelt by the unit, laid his thumb on the button, and turned his head back to the group.

They stood watching him, silent, unmoving.

"Yellow!" shouted Ward. Veins showed on his forehead. "Yellow, insubordinate and superstitious, every man-jack of you. Cover your pink eyes and plug up your yellow ears, because, misters, here she goes!" Thunder split the morning air, drowning the echoes of his voice as it rolled across the camp.

The mouth of the valley heaved. Smoke and shale scattered as the rocks split viciously, crumbled. Dust enveloped the men and huts,

fine, choking powder that set up sudden spasms of coughing. Ward crouched low, an arm shielding his face, watching. His face was taut, grim.

Slowly the air cleared.

The pile of rocks was flat, broken. Where there had been a majestic heap of red-brown boulders, there was now a jagged plain of slag, the dust still wisping above it but thinning as it sank earthwards.

Ward rose to his feet, methodically dusted his clothes, with slow, deliberate movements. Small dust clouds rose from the material, disintegrated and settled around his feet. He spat specks of dirt from his lips, turned, and rejoined the silent group. They watched him, their eyes blank of expression. Ward's face showed nothing and his gaze singled out no one as he spoke.

"Someone bring the truck round to the medical building. I'll want driving to the blast-off field in five minutes. The rest of you get on with it. There's a heap of rubbish over there that needs clearing. Nobody need think himself indispensable. If he doesn't like his job, he can get another, but not with this outfit. Maybe Interplanetary Developments can use you. I hear they're tackling some juicy wild-life on Cator III." He looked around. "Where's Keiler?"

"He quit," said someone drily.

"So he did," said Ward. He

looked the men over, stoney-faced. "So he did." His eyes singled out a red-haired man at the front of the group. "Wales, you're in charge of this crowd until I get a permanent replacement up here. I don't envy you your working material. Stick tight to the schedule and fire anybody who complains he can't work because of cold feet."

The red-haired man shrugged, said nothing.

Ward said: "Get moving."

He turned on his heel and headed towards the medical building. The doctor looked up from his desk. He was a mild-eyed man in his forties, balding, and with a comfortable look. He smiled, a little wryly, at Ward.

"Anybody who wasn't awake and on the job should be by now, Mr. Ward." He laughed. "That was quite an alarm clock you set off . . ." Despite his smile, Ward detected unease in his face.

He said: "Get over to administration and give Huxley a shot of something to quiet his nerves. He tired and I want him over it as quickly as possible. Keep him in bed for a day or so and then contact me at head office, let me know what you think. I don't want to, but I may have to replace him. That's between you and me." He looked searchingly at the doctor. "I wouldn't bet a shirt button that you'll keep your mouth shut, but that's the order.

—A tight lip. Understand?"

The doctor nodded slowly. His comfortable look had left him.

Ward said: "You a superstitious man?"

The doctor smiled briefly. "Medical science wouldn't progress very fast or far if it allowed much room to that kind of thing, Mr. Ward." He bit his lip. "I take it you're referring to this business of the rocks?"

"For the love of Heaven!" Ward raised his arms from his sides, then let them drop again. His face was bitter. "Is Huxley such a blabbermouth that he lets every man on the camp in on the local superstitions? Every group has its element of people with more gullibility than sense, but the crew I picked for this job beats all. Next time, by God, I'll screen them personally." He looked hard at the other man. "How much stock do *you* put in this black magic?"

The doctor said, guardedly: "Mr. Ward, I don't have to tell you that we're treading on alien ground here on Maro. In a great many respects it resembles our own planet, atmosphere, similar vegetation over large areas, and so on. But it can't be a carbon-copy of Earth. None of the planets so far developed *have* turned out that way. Bishop's Planet, Cator I, Apollo—on the surface they've all had a remarkably similar geological history, but the unexpected

has always been there. Often dangerous. The killing trees on Cator, the dry swamps on Apollo—the first men died until science stepped in to protect them.” He paused, and tapped nervously on the desk top. “Of course, since we changed the originally planned route to the present one, the customary government geological survey hasn’t preceded us . . .” He saw Ward’s face, and stopped.

Ward said, softly: “Do I take it you’re querying the present operation? My decisions?” He looked bitterly at the man. “Do you have one fraction of an idea how much crawling I have to do, the amount of pompous back-chat I have to take to swing a deal like this one? With planetary development booming the way it is, it costs me plenty in hard cash and pride to ensure we get our rightful share.” He bared his teeth. “Mister, you’ll never know.”

The doctor’s neck and ears were red. He looked stiffly at the blotter in front of him.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry.” Ward looked at him, not unkindly. “Stick with your pills and your soothing little shots, Reeves. You don’t know how lucky you are.” He looked at his watch again. “If I’m going to make that rocket, I’d better get out of here. Contact me about Huxley as soon as you have any ideas.”

A truck waited outside the office.

Ward got in, saying nothing to the driver. He jerked his head impatiently. The truck moved off, out of the silent camp, towards the rocket field.

Ward was used to the blast-off, but that did not increase his liking for it. His ears were singing when acceleration finally ceased and he was able to unbuckle the straps. He sat up, swallowed hard several times, made a wry mouth at the failure of this, then slid off the bunk and onto his feet.

Space sickness still dogged him a little, and he never travelled without a supply of the necessary pills. He rummaged for them in his bag, took two, washed them down with water, then gargled for a moment or two with what remained in the tumbler. He could still feel the dust at the back of his mouth and nose, gritty and tasteless. He spat in the wash basin, rinsed his mouth around with fresh water, then pondered what to do until dinner time. He had nothing to read in the cabin and there was about half an hour to wait for the meal. Passengers were not really welcome when using the corridors purely for exercise, but he felt the need to get out of the confines of the cabin. He decided on a change of shoes before he went. His feet were hot, and there was some form of obstruction in the toe of one of his shoes. He sat down on the

edge of the bunk, removed the shoe, tipped it, shook out the offending object, then bent to unbuckle the other.

He paused.

The floor of the cabin was off-white plastic sheeting. Beside his discarded shoe, the minute red pebble stood out very clearly. He stared at it, motionless, for several seconds, before picking up the shoe he had just removed. With the toe of it, he lightly prodded at the pebble. It slid, unresisting, in the direction it was pushed.

"Of course," he said aloud. "Why not?" He prodded again. The pebble continued to slide.

Ward bent down, placed the shoe on the floor, picked up the pebble between his finger and thumb. It was hard, round and shiny. He thought of the rocks at the mouth of the valley, the gritty, easily crumbling texture of them. Only the colour was similar, and, on reflection, paler than the thing that now rested on the palm of his hand, glinting dully in the fluorescent light. He jerked it forward onto his fingers, hooked a thumb under it, flicked. It spun upwards, winking at him, then settled back on his palm. He looked at it, smiled.

"Just another imaginative old biddy," he said. "Hiding behind that tycoon gloss." He laughed, shook his head. "What do you say, little man?"

The stone stirred fractionally on his palm.

He stared at it, his eyes dilating slowly, until white was visible all round the pupils. His breath caught for a moment, then continued jerkily.

"Do that again," he said. "Damn you."

Nothing happened. The stone sat motionless, gleaming.

"A trick of the light?" Ward pondered this aloud, sweating. His eyes were still fixed firmly on his palm. "Nervy hand? Could be." He rose to his feet, his arm stretched well in front of him. "But just so we don't encourage any nightmares, outside you go." He tipped it gently on the flap of the disposal chute, pressed the button set in the side. He looked at his empty palms. They were wet with sweat and shaking.

"Mister, you could use that walk. But maybe a shower first."

He stripped, stepped into the shower. The water was cool on his heavy perspiring body. He lathered vigorously, singing. There was a faint rattle beneath the flap of the disposal chute that he entirely failed to hear.

It was dusk when Ward left the Pioneer Projects building and headed for home. The rocket had landed shortly after sun-up that morning, since which time he had not left his office. He was hungry, too. He reflected that sandwiches,

vitamin pills and coffee were poor substitutes for a decent meal. His mouth ran wet, the thought of cooked food foremost in his mind.

As the 'copter whirled whisperingly over the glittering city, he glanced back over his shoulder. The red neon fist, the company's trade mark, and the uncompromising block capitals, twenty feet high, washed the roofs of the surrounding lower buildings with muted fire. Ward smiled.

"You're high," he said aloud. "And going higher."

He flipped the switch to maximum speed. It was dark when he feathered the machine onto the hanger ramp. He got out, turned round, reached for his brief-case, hesitated. "The hell with it," he said. He slapped it with his open hand, grinned. "I've had my share of *you* today, my friend." He left it by the seat and button-pushed the helicopter into its shelter.

There were no lights on the porch as he approached the house. He thought this odd. He stopped for a moment in the gloom. Light was visible in an upstairs window and around the side of the house, eliminating the possibility of a breakdown. There were six lamps on the porch, and normally all were lit. Now there was nothing but a solid wedge of black shadow.

"Strange," he said loudly.

He stepped abruptly forward

towards the porch steps, impatient at his halt. The impenetrable blackness took him in. His foot caught dully on something, he floundered blindly, then fell jarringly to his knees.

Behind him something moved, "What——?"

His groping hand found the porch step. He levered himself to his feet fast, stumbled clumsily onto the porch, spun round and pressed his back against the door, breathing hard.

Something thumped against the step.

His hand, groping behind him, found the door handle. He spun it, stepped back into the darkened hall, and hauled frantically at the light switch. Light flooded behind him, spilling onto the porch. In the darkness of his shadow, something slithered. Breath hissed between his teeth. He backed across the carpeted floor, his shadow retreating with him. He was nearly in the centre of the hall when he saw it clearly.

The dull red stone, the size of a fist, sat unmoving in the path of light.

Feet sounded on the stars behind him. "Tom!"

His wife's voice. "Tom, I had no idea you were home." The feet moved faster. "What on earth are you doing, standing there like that?" She reached him, grasped his arm. "Tom!"

Ward said, hoarsely: "Keep

away." His eyes stared unblinkingly through the open doorway. He fended her back with his arm. "Keep away."

Her face was puckered, eyes frightened. "Tom! What is it?"

"Keep away!" bellowed Ward. In a sudden mad rush, he charged the door, slapping hard with a rigid hand. It swept shut, booming woodenly into its frame. He squeezed the catch, shoulders hunched, his body straining heavily against the panels.

"Tom . . ."

Ward crouched by the door, his ear pressed hard against the wood. There was no sound outside.

"For Heaven's sake, Tom . . ." Her voice was a frightened whisper.

He turned slowly around towards her. She was shocked at his face. He was grey, his fleshy nostrils pinched and white. He leaned against the door, hands behind him, pressing hard on the catch, breathing deeply, his mouth closed and small.

She came and stood in front of him, her bath robe clutched high beneath her chin.

"Tom, is there someone . . .?"

"Someone," said Ward. He lowered his head, breathing through his mouth now. "Something."

"Something?"

He shook his head mutely.

She said, dry-lipped: "The police . . ."

He shook his head again. A

rattle sounded in his throat, a cross between a sob and a laugh. "The police," he said. He straightened, brought his hands from behind him and worked his wet palms on his trouser legs. "Get me a drink, Evie."

"But Tom, if there's something . . ."

"Nothing for the police. A shadow. Get me a drink." He smiled at her, sickly. "A man's drink."

She opened her mouth, caught her breath, shook her head once, turned, and went into the living room.

Glass clinked against glass. She brought it to him held between both hands. Watching her, his eyes dull with fatigue, he saw Huxley, the pale, taut face, and the glass clamped tight between hands that were afraid to relax. He took the drink, downed it in one gasping swallow.

"Tom," she said. Her voice was small. "Do you have enemies, the kind that would come for you in the dark?" Her face was crumpled. "What have you done to them? Tom, you must tell me."

He shook his head again, slowly, tiredly. "Shadows," he said. "Just the shadows out there." He looked at her, bleakly. "Evie, what happened to the porch lights?"

Here eyes opened wide, uncomprehending. "The lights?"

Fear grasped at him again. He sank his head on his chest, eyes closed.

In the hard, cold light of morning, Ward stirred at the broken glass with his foot. He looked sideways along the porch. Thin slivers of it were everywhere, mute evidence of destruction that winked palely at him. He went back inside the house, seated himself in the breakfast nook.

The swinging door that led to the kitchen opened. His wife came through carrying a tray. Silently, she prepared cereal, poured him coffee.

Neither spoke until she was seated, a cup in her hand. She nursed it, her fingers stroking the side in short nervous movements.

"Tom."

He looked up at her silently. She looked at the drawn face, the listless, tired eyes with the spark of fear still glowing dully far back.

"What were you looking for on the porch? When I was in the kitchen?" Her voice was low and obviously controlled. "There aren't any black shadows so early in the day." She sipped her coffee, not because she wanted it, but because she had no more to say.

Ward stirred in his chair, attempted a smile. "Just looking around." He steadied his hands on his cup and tried the smile again. He felt it was a little better

this time. "Checking the lights, to be exact. We must have had some fool kids trespassing around the place last night. All the bulbs are smashed. Better get Jonas to sweep up the mess when we're finished here. The cat might cut its feet."

Her eyes were perplexed. "Kids? In the garden throwing stones?" She did not notice his slight wince. "Why, I heard none. Surely stones would have bounced off the walls, made some sort of racket."

"Some stones are pretty quiet," he said. He smiled awkwardly, gulped hard at his coffee. "Never mind the post-mortem, honey. That's what it must have been. Get it cleared and get the spare bulbs in."

He rose, pushed back his chair.

She said: "Tom, you haven't eaten a scrap. Must you get to the office so early? It's barely eight."

He came round the table, squeezed her shoulder.

"Not hungry. If I feel it before dinner, I'll get some sandwiches sent up." He patted her cheek. "Don't fret. I'll be back early tonight. Six or so." He hoped his voice sounded steadier than it did to his own ears. "Before it gets dark."

"Yes," she said. She patted his hand where it rested on her shoulder. "Before dark."

She watched him leave the

room, rose and followed him into the hallway.

"Tom, what we were talking about in bed last night . . ."

"About a vacation?" He shrugged into his coat and smiled, a little wanly. "Honey, there's nothing I'd like better, but you know how things are just now. Things are piled up high at the office, and the machine mustn't break down just because I'm feeling the strain a bit."

She said: "You're not a machine. You've got to rest sometime." She held his arm. "Tom, it's nine years since you took any sort of break. I know how it is with the government and the competition, but a few days will do no harm. You're more tired than I've ever seen you." Her eyes pleaded. "Please, Tom. Just a few days."

"Maybe." He picked up his hat, settled it on his head. "Maybe. I'll think about it." He pecked her cheek. "Take care. See you at six."

As he went through the door she half-raised a hand towards his retreating back.

"You take care," she said.

He nodded, smiled, went out, shutting the door behind him. She heard his feet hesitate on the porch, then hurry down the steps, crunching gravel as he walked away from the house. She stood there for a long while, straining her ears against the silence.

Ward eased the control forward, brought the helicopter down gently on the landing space of the roof. A robot mechanic bustled forward.

"Check it this morning, Mr. Ward?"

Ward nodded, climbed out, picked up his brief-case and headed towards the elevator pent-house. Down on his own office floor he exchanged nods, good-mornings with the few people already seated at their desks, selected a fresh carnation from the bunch on his secretary's desk, took the proffered mail, and entered his office. Seated at his desk, he checked the morning correspondence, dictated a handful of brief replies then started on his report to the board.

In pencil, he headed the foolscap sheet, "Report on Government Project, Maro."

He underlined the last word and smiled, a little ruefully. He was feeling better. The high, cold air above the city, and the silver brightness of the morning sky had done a lot to dispel his fears of the previous evening, on his trip in. Maybe Evie was right. He was tired, and he admitted it to himself. His explanation of the previous evening's happenings had seemed lame at the time that he had offered it, but now, in familiar surroundings, with the bustle of normality outside his door, he wasn't so sure. Kids had trespassed

before. He'd seen them himself, chased them. Why, he'd routed two of them the day he took off for Maro, seen them from his bedroom window while packing and hollered until they'd scuttled away through the orchard like startled animals, spilling apples as they ran. What was the betting it was the same kids, seeking an adolescent revenge? He'd stake his life on it. The stone? Deliberately left there for him to trip over. A typical piece of childish cunning. But it had moved. He stiffened.

Optical illusion. That was it. As he'd backed, his shadow had moved towards him. Gave the stone the appearance of moving. He laughed. God, though, he must be tired. That was the second occurrence of its kind in just over a week. First in the rocket and then last night. Spectacles, maybe. He shook his head. Eyes as sound as a couple of credits. Still . . .

He clicked the inter-office communicator, told his secretary to arrange an appointment with Mead, the optician. Contented, he wrote steadily for a while, crossing out, amending as he went. Something gave him pause. The stone, where had it been when he went out onto the porch that morning? He worried over that for a while, a trace of fear stirring in a corner of his mind. The servant? Jonas? Could be. He was a robot Class A and didn't need any telling. If

something was out of place it didn't stay there long with Jonas around. Maybe the kids. Taking a childish delight in adding another little touch to The Mystery of the Darkened Porch. He smiled, a little grimly. Little devils. He'd take it out of their hides when he saw them next. Either way, the problem was solved. He'd make things right for Evie, too, take that vacation she'd wanted so much. Not right now, maybe, but in a month or so.

Suddenly he was ravenously hungry. Small wonder, with nothing inside him but a cup of coffee. He thought about sandwiches and grimaced. He'd had no cooked food for twenty-four hours. The report could stew for an hour. That could wait, his stomach couldn't.

He went into the outer office.

"Miss Brecht, cancel all appointments for the next hour." He smiled at her, almost winked, restrained himself just in time. "I have a date with a chicken."

She took that without a flicker. "Yes, Mr. Ward."

He chuckled, went smiling from the office, took the elevator to the ground floor.

In the street, he took deep lungfuls of air as he walked. God, but that felt good! Even with the best air conditioning available an office still retained the smell of thick-pile carpets and polished wood. The open, that was the

place to be. He recalled nostalgically his early, formative years in business, when he had regularly breathed the air of numberless alien landscapes, stood spraddle-footed and filled with the sense of awe that only the early pioneers of space travel had felt, before the walls of success had closed in on him and confined him to a working space of eighty square feet of office carpeting.

He shrugged off the thought. Success had brought more practical rewards than a succession of strange landscapes. Another five, six years, and he could safely consider retirement if he felt inclined that way. In the meantime, maybe he could fit in a few more trips like the just completed one to Maro . . .

He paused there in his thinking. Well, maybe not quite like the one to Maro. That had carried more than its fair share of headaches and there was little doubt it had done his nerves no good. There must have been something about the place if a youngster like Huxley could be driven off the deep end in such a short space of time. Sure, a planetary development engineer had his hands full keeping to the rigid schedule that high-powered competition demanded, but for a man to fold so quick . . . There must be something about such a place.

Something that had been nibbling irritatingly far back in his

mind snapped into place with a shocking suddenness. He faltered in his walk, coldness caressing him with a clammy hand.

The rock on the porch. But it hadn't been on the porch. Not when he had tripped. He had tripped *before* reaching the steps. His mouth was dry. *Before* reaching the steps. What else? Fearfully, his mind probed. The movement behind him, whispering in the blackness. He almost cried out. *Before* he had scrambled, filled with sweating panic, up the steps onto the porch . . .

The stone exploded on the pavement beside him, less than a foot to his right. Red splinters peppered his trouser legs, scattering madly with the force of the impact.

For seconds he stood motionless, still as death, before sheer animal self-preservation made him step blunderingly to his left and press up against the wall. His head roared, deafeningly. Grey fog swirled in front of his eyes. Something grasped his arm, and he cried out in terror, hauling frantically to break the grip.

"Take it easy!" The pressure on his arm increased. "Easy, mister."

He still cried out, squeezing his way along the wall. He felt himself grasped firmly by the shoulders. A red, perspiring face peered closely into his own.

"Easy there." The owner of the

voice was strong, his hands steadying Ward's suddenly limp body. "What happened, did a splinter get you?" More hands were running expertly over his legs. Another voice said: "No cuts. Probably a bruise or two. Shock more than anything. By God, that was close. Another foot . . ."

The red face said: "He's shaking like a pup." A hand slipped under Ward's arm and he felt himself being propped on a meaty shoulder. "Where you from, mister? You work near here?"

Ward was silent, trembling furiously.

The voice said: "Call a cab, Mac. Better get him down to the hospital. Here's a guy who's out on his feet."

Ward felt himself being steered away from the protection of the wall. He cried out, gaspingly, tried to fight his way back. More hands grasped him and he was dimly aware of being half lifted into the cab. The door slammed.

The voice said: "Madison Hospital. Make it fast. I don't want this guy dying on me. He looks like he's ready to go any time."

Ward closed his eyes, relaxing numbly against the cushions.

He was still ashen when the doctor entered the rest room some few hours later.

"Shirt off, please, Mr. Ward."

He took it off, sat abjectly while

his chest was sounded. The doctor's eyes flickered up from his bent position.

"You're the darndest man. A double dose of sedative and you fight it like a tiger. Afraid to sleep? Something you don't want to dream about?" He smiled. "Like what happened a few hours ago, for instance? Relax, man. It's over and done with."

Ward shook his head slowly.

"No?" The face above the white coat still smiled, eyebrows raised. "Afraid somebody else is going to drop the contents of a rock garden near you? I don't know what the statistics are, but the chances of such an incident recurring to the same person in his lifetime are well-nigh infinitesimal. Rest assured on that."

Ward moved a tongue that felt thick and woolly over dry lips. "How did it happen?" His voice was low, hoarse, and his eyes moved continually about the room.

The doctor said: "Some damn fool of a workman dumped a pile of rocks on the parapet. The people in the penthouse are having a rockery made up there. True, it's a pretty wide parapet, and the man responsible for the dumping swears they were all well away from the edge, but it's obvious what happened. They were piled precariously, a little vibration from somewhere, over she goes. Sheer thoughtlessness which could have cost a life."

"I——" Ward licked his lips again, took a deep breath. "I want to make a rather odd request."

He looked at the querying face.

"Would you check with the people working on the penthouse? Would you ask them . . . ?" He moved his head about, sweating. The doctor watched him, curiously. Ward said, breathlessly: "The colour of the rocks. The stuff that they're using up there, what sort of rock is it? Granite, sandstone . . . ?" He looked up at the doctor. "Would you do that?"

The doctor smiled, moved to the door. "Certainly, if you feel that it's going to ease your mind in any way. I can get them on the videophone from the office." He stopped in the open doorway. "Why not come along and check it yourself? If they have colour video on the premises—nothing like checking a thing visually."

Ward shook his head violently.

"As you like." The doctor beamed a professional smile. "Be right back."

Ward sat, passively fighting the sedative, his hands cupped taut over his knees. Minutes passed.

The doctor returned. "Red sandstone. Very popular for its present purpose, so they told . . ." He saw Ward's face, stopped. He moved in, fingered his wrist. "Easy, now." He felt the racing pulse beneath his thumb, frowned. "The wrong answer, I take it.

What is there about red sandstone that causes a flip like this?"

Ward's head was on his chest. He said, mumblingly: "Accident. Few years back. Nearly got caught in a rock-fall." He took a deep breath. "Bad one. Several of my men killed. Lousy red sandstone. Tricky stuff for blasting, breaks up too easily . . ."

The doctor was nodding continuously.

"Ever have dreams about it?"

"Once in a while," Ward lied. He had made his decision and saw no point in prolonging the conversation. "Guess that's it. Coincidence of a kind. Nearly pick up my dinner-pail a couple of times, red sandstone in both cases. Pretty natural thing for me to do, I guess, sweating it out like this."

"Most natural thing in the world." The doctor was pleased, and looked it. "A very normal sequence of events as far as the nervous system is concerned. It's amazing how long old tensions will stay with us, just waiting to jump out and say boo. A trigger like today's happening was all that was needed in your case." He looked at Ward seriously. "We have an excellent neurologist on the staff here. It might be a good thing if you were to fix up for a series of appointments. Treatment can be arranged at your own home."

"Might be the thing all right."

Ward attempted a smile. "No slur intended on your man here, of course, but my wife had a little trouble a while back, and got put right in a couple of shakes. Thought I might try the same man. Kent, Kemp . . ?" He tucked his lower lip between his teeth, puckered his face.

"Kennett," said the doctor. His eyes showed respect. "Top man in the field. Just the fellow, if you can afford him. Very busy right now, I believe, but you'll probably get to him in a week or so." He stepped back, reached Ward's jacket from the peg on the locker door, held it wide for Ward to shrug into. "In the meantime, take my tip and have a week or so's rest, preferably away from the city. You'll be back in trim in no time. I've been talking to your wife on the videophone. She tells me you have a cabin of sorts out in the woods somewhere. Just the place. Rest easy, sleep when you want to, maybe a little fishing, walks in the woods, that sort of thing. Best medicine on God's Earth for what's ailing you." He handed Ward his hat. "If I were you, I'd get onto Kennett straight away. He's in the videophone book and a quick call should get you an appointment pretty soon."

He escorted Ward to the door.

"I've laid on a 'copter to take you home. It might be wise if you take a sedative and get

straight to bed when you get there. A few hours' sleep will freshen you for the trip." He halted by the elevator doors, held out his hand. "Best of luck, and just amble along at a steady rate for as long as you're able." He smiled cheerfully. "Won't be long before all this seems like just another of those bad dreams we're going to cure for you."

"I'll see to it," said Ward.

His face was grim as he entered the elevator.

The cabin was large, a solid, one-roomed building of stone and pine logs, comfortably shaded by the backcloth of conifers that stretched for a way and then petered out at the base of the shale-scattered hillside.

The air was clear and cool as Ward set the helicopter down in the clearing before the cabin. "There she is."

His wife smiled. "Glad we came?" She rested a hand on his knee.

"Sure." Ward climbed out, began stacking the baggage on the ground by his feet, breathing deeply as he did so. "There's something about a mountain smell. Peaceful but invigorating, you might call it. Here." He helped her down, stooped, hefted the largest bags, and headed for the building. "Open her up, Evie. I'll get the rest of the stuff up

here." He dumped the bags by the door, went back to the machine.

He heard the door of the cabin open; the sound of her feet echoing hollowly on the bare boards as she entered. He bent inside the 'plane, unzipped the holdall that had been tucked under his seat, removed the disintegrator and slipped it into the front of his windcheater. With the rest of the luggage tucked beneath either arm, he looked towards the cabin, raising his eyes above its roof, scanning the slope visible between the dark trees.

"If you're up there, you——" he said. "You'd best come and get me. I've run as far as I aim to."

The mountain breeze sighed high above his head, faintly stirring the tops of the towering trees.

"I'll be waiting," he said.

He smiled tautly and walked to the cabin.

"It's a fine morning," Evie said. She stood by the window she had just opened, sniffing luxuriously at the cool pine air. Ward kicked back the sheets and joined her. The sun was bright in the east, shimmering against a wash of pale blue sky.

"Looks good," he said. He slipped an arm across her shoulders, squeezed. "How about something that tastes good?"

She smiled up at him. "Just a few minutes."

Ward dressed, pulled his handkerchief from beneath his pillow and the disintegrator with it, slipping it again inside his windcheater and zipping the front three quarters closed.

"Tom."

Startled, he turned.

"Tom, what's that you've got there?"

He said nothing.

"What you had under your pillow. Something hard. I felt it during the night." She was slicing bread as she talked, not watching him, the knife moving cleanly through the loaf.

"This?" Ward ducked a hand inside his cheater, pulled out the weapon and smiled ruefully. "Safety measure, I guess. There's still a mountain lion or two in these hills. I've been figuring on doing quite a bit of walking and there's no sense in dragging a rifle around. For one thing, I'm out of practice so why take chances? People up here for the hunting are the only ones that use rifles any more." He watched her, smiling, wary.

"Why keep it under your pillow?" she said. "It's hardly likely a mountain lion would get to us in here, is it, Tom?" She made it more of a statement than a question.

"Of course not. Oh, hell." He cuffed his free hand at his thigh

irritably. He looked at her, brow puckered. "Evie, I'm nervous. You know what they said at the hospital. This thing is likely to last for a little while. Just because we're up here in the mountains, it doesn't mean I can shuck it off like a winter overcoat. I just—" He spread his hands. "I just feel better with it where I can feel it."

Her smile looked a little forced.

"Anything you say." She closed the subject. "Fetch a chair. Coffee's ready. You might as well make a start."

He watched her covertly throughout the meal, but she did not mention it again. Afterwards, he dried the dishes, stacked them in a cupboard, and filled a pipe, leaning against the door jamb.

"Think I'll take a stroll." He tamped the tobacco carefully, head bent. "Weather report was fair for the week, but you can never tell when it might break." He squinted skywards. "There's a little cloud now. Could be building up." He paused to light his pipe, taking his time over the operation. "What do you say?"

She continued with her dusting.

"There're still times when I prefer you to make my decisions for me." Her voice was quiet. "You're a little edgy this morning. Maybe you'd prefer to go alone." She snapped the duster at a floating piece of cobweb. "I'll leave it with you, Tom." He

gripped the still-smoking match tight between finger and thumb.

"Maybe." He pushed the pipe into his mouth. "Maybe." He snapped the match away across the clearing, looked at his watch. "Ten o'clock. Dinner around one?"

"Fine," she said. "When you're ready."

He pecked her cheek, making it casual.

"Take care," she said.

"You and your take care," he said affectionately.

He went out of the cabin, turned and waved as he entered the trees that sloped gently away behind the hill.

He walked carefully, keeping to the shelter of the trees, skirting warily along the matted pine needles. His eyes raked the slope as he went, narrowing whenever he sighted a rock cluster scattered on the hillside. His hand was inside the front of his windcheater, gripping the disintegrator. Birds chattered wildly in the trees above his head. There was no wind.

For half an hour he made steady progress. The trees in front of him thinned. He came to a clearing, shadowed by a cliff which leaned steeply outwards, towering far above the tops of the trees. He halted and made a careful survey.

There were half a dozen tree stumps in the centre and no loose rock visible. He ran his

gaze up the cliff face. It was grey granite, deeply fissured, with patches of moss lipping the scars. There was thick brush at the top, a few creepers dangling over the edge. He walked forward, selected a stump and sat down with his back towards the cliff. He still gripped the disintegrator close to his waist. With his free hand he fumbled for his pipe, cold and still half-filled with tobacco, from a top pocket and sat with it clenched by his knee.

He looked around, breathing deeply.

"Well," he said aloud. "Why don't you make a play?"

The brush around the clearing was still. The birds had gone elsewhere and the trees rose high in front of him, unmoving. He listened to the deep silence of the woods and was afraid.

"Where I go, you go," he said. He licked his lips. "Me and my shadow. Why don't you come and get me?"

His voice rasped in the stillness, echoed faintly from the cliff.

"Come on out," he said.

Silence.

He pressed his hand to his knee, to still the shaking. His shirt clung to him wetly. "You've played around long enough" he said. The fear was harsh in his voice. "Come on out and fight like a man." A high laugh bubbled in his throat, broke. "Like a man," he said.

A bird called, the sharp twitter muffled by distance and the trees.

"Why the hell don't you come?" he whispered.

The brush stirred, over to his left.

He shot to his feet, whipped the disintegrator from the shelter of his clothes, levelled it.

A small furry animal ran from the undergrowth, skittered wildly across the clearing and vanished into the trees on the other side. The silence came again.

He stood there, shaking, mouth-ing whispered obscenities after the animal, whirled frantically at another sound.

Another one, two, of the brown fur bundles. They came blindly, one of them jumping instinctively over the barrier made by one of his spread feet. He kicked at it, missed, whirled again, cursing, as the brush rustled into life.

In a steady padding stream they came, rabbits, squirrels, mice, a beaver, moving fast across the open ground. They ignored him, scuttling into the brush with fever-haste, rustling away into silence. Frantically, he sniffed at the air. There was none of the tell-tale acidity of smoke.

"Then why do they run?"

He pawed his hair back from his forehead. He stared fixedly at the deep green silence from which they had come. His teeth gritted hard.

"There's *something* there to scare them." He whispered, barely audible. "Something to make them afraid." He shouted. "Something!"

In front of him the brush rustled again. He fired blindly, heard the dull splintering, the tortuous groan as the tree he had hit lurched drunkenly, towered above him, falling. Arms across his face, he backed, felt the sudden cold hardness of the cliff strike his back as the tree hissed past striking the ground with cracking thunder. Splinters, dust, pine needles, filled the clearing. With the hand still holding his pipe, he covered his mouth, coughing rackingly as it billowed thick about him. The echoes died. After long seconds, the dust began to settle. He knuckled hard at his smarting eyes, opened them, stared about him.

The rock sat motionless as death in the centre of the clearing.

It was bigger now than when he had last seen it, the size of a man's head, and the shine had dulled. The colour, too, had faded. Now he could vaguely see the pinky dullness that he had last seen in the scattered barrier at the valley mouth, with the dust mourning hazily above it in the cold alien air.

He bared his teeth. "You're a fast-growin' boy," he said. His voice was high. He held the disintegrator stiffly behind his leg. He wondered if it had been

seen. "You've done a lot of travelling."

He watched it like a hawk, his body rigid. There was still no movement.

"You're there," he said, "and I'm here. Why don't we get together?"

Closer, he thought. Make it a little closer. Holy Father, I mustn't miss!

"Sure, I blasted your family, or your buddies, or whatever they were," he said. "Man's got to progress, and all the freaks in the universe aren't going to stop him."

He stared unblinkingly.

"You're a freak," he said. Nothing.

A thought struck him. He lifted his hand that gripped the pipe, its stem pointing outwards. "I'll show you how scared I am of you," he said. He tossed the pipe into the clearing. It settled halfway between them.

The rock rose, moved backwards. Two feet along the ground it hovered, waiting.

"Yellow belly," said Ward. He ran his tongue over his lips. He stooped quickly, grasped a snapped-off branch by the broken end, gestured with it. "I don't need a gun. I'll take you on with this." He spat. "This and my boots. How about that?"

The rock sank earthwards, settled in the dust.

It began to grow. The indentations on its surface grew to small

holes, the small cracks to widening fissures as it swelled silently, its shine and colour dimming as it spread.

Ward grinned devilishly. "The bigger they come . . ."

He thought ecstatically: *Grow you —! Bloat yourself into a target a blind man couldn't miss!*

Now it was as high as Ward, and a slender egg-shape, dulled down to the remembered shade of gritty red. An alien sensation touched his mind, questioning.

"Ready," he said.

The rock rose and hurled itself across the clearing, a blur of pastel movement.

He dropped to one knee, whipping the disintegrator into view, sighting for the barest fraction of a second before he squeezed the trigger. He knew he'd hit it because he heard the dull, crackling impact, and saw the violent jerk as it veered off its rigidly fixed course. Blinded with sweat, he whipped the disintegrator round, squeezed again . . .

The rock took him brutally in his side, rib-crushing, gouging. He sprawled violently sideways, clawing at the ground. The disintegrator flew from his hand, pitched at the base of the cliff. With a madman's energy he dived for it, got his hand to it when the rock took him again, furiously driving him in a bone-crushing stagger towards the unclimbable wall.

The rock was tired and nearly ready to die. Its pliable body structure had degenerated in the dry earth atmosphere and the glancing blow from Ward's disintegrator, as well as tearing away its side, had evaporated the major proportion of its bodily moisture. Hazily, it dreamed of the cool, damp valley where it had lain since the birth of its planet, by now a graveyard, paved with the powdered bodies of its kind, swallowed by a man-made river of black.

During its brief stay on Earth, it had absorbed scenes, impressions, customs. It stirred from where it was bedded in the blood-spattered ground, wavered, changed its shape, finishing as a wedge-shaped slab with a sharp cutting edge.

Laboriously it scraped a shallow trench in the ground at the base of the cliff, keeping the earth in a neat pile to one side. With dimming senses, it levered what was left of Ward into the hole in the ground, then replaced the earth slowly, sluggishly tamped it firm.

With what was left of its strength, it rose, hovered briefly, then dropped heavily, sharp edge downwards, cutting cleanly into the earth at the head of the covered trench. For brief moments its surface shimmered, changing, regular grooved indentations appearing faintly.

The stone was a mimic to the last.

BOOKS

THE ROCKET PIONEERS by Beryl Williams and Samuel Epstein. Lutterworth Press, 15s., 147 pages. Illustrated with photographs.

Space travel is yet to come, but already its history is being written. This book deals not so much with things as with people and what they have done, even without conscious intent, to further man's conquest of space. As the foreword *Who Are the Pioneers?* points out, the interplanetary rocket, when it finally takes form, will owe much to the rocket pioneers of the past, and, while not all of them tried to construct a space rocket, all of them helped.

William Congreve was such a pioneer, and while he was primarily concerned with using the rocket as an instrument of warfare, he did much to advance known design. Jules Verne did his part, as did Ziolkovsky, the pioneer theorist; Goddard, the Father of American Rocketry; and Oberth, designer of spaceships. These and many others, what they did and how they did it, are to be found in this book, together with the overall basic pattern of modern rocketry.

From Congreve to Peenemünde and the V.2, covers a century and a half and makes fascinating reading. From Peenemünde to Space Station One? No one yet knows, but it could be sooner than you think.

Better catch up on your history.

SCIENTIFIC USES OF EARTH SATELLITES edited by James A. Van Allen. Chapman and Hall, 63s., 316 pages. Illustrated with line drawings.

As its title and cost implies, this is a heavy book in more ways than one. A big, solid volume, it is a serious study of a project which is dear to us all. Based on the scientific papers presented at the meeting of the Upper Atmosphere Research Panel, held at the University of Michigan early in 1956, it comprises the detailed, analytical study of the project by a group of seasoned veterans; experts in their field.

It isn't light reading but it isn't intended to be. Filled with mathematical equations, detailed drawings and reasoned arguments, it is a feast of speculative thought to anyone who has a smattering



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of algebra. Primarily a book written by scientists for scientists or those with a scientific bent. But if you can't follow mathematical equations this one isn't for you.

YOU'LL SEE by Egon Larsen.
Rider & Co., 16s., 176 pages.
Illustrated.

This book is basically a time travel novel but, to the older reader, it is a time travel book in more senses than one. The plot is simple: the hero, a newspaper reporter, is put into suspended animation for twenty-five years and wakes in 1982. From then on the book is devoted to a glorified sight-seeing tour of the modern Utopia with lashings of explanations as to how all this came about.

And it is a modern Utopia. The author cheerfully admits that he has thrown aside all gloom and despondency, and has concentrated on the brighter side of things. No devastated Earth for him. No radiation-torn remnants of a shattered population eking a scant living from the poisoned soil. Instead, he shows us a world in which war is a thing of the past and a benevolent World Government is in full charge. Racial and religious prejudices have largely disappeared, the Sahara is irrigated and India is an industrial giant. Helicopters are common, and nuclear power

tapped by an "atomic battery" system has changed the face of the world. Monorail trains and fast submarines have been developed and the "killer" diseases conquered. The life expectancy has been pushed into well over the century mark and weather has been controlled. And space travel, too, naturally.

Where the older reader gets his bonus is in the writing itself.

It took me way back to the old Gernsback era so that I travelled twenty-five years in reverse. The same wide-eyed amazement, the same ultra-modern wonders and the inevitable explanations, the same dissertations and the "Gosh! Wow! Boy-o-boy!" reactions of the "hero."

If you want to know how a large part of the early science fiction was written then this book will show you. If you would like to know just what sort of a place this present-day world could be, then this book will show you that, too. Because the author has the last laugh. Nothing he has described is new. A full appendix shows that every discovery he mentions, system used or inventions utilised are known here and now. If the nations would use the money spent on war material, on progress instead, then we could have everything described.

But that was known in the old days, too.